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August 5, 1890.

No. 680.

\$2.50
a Year.

PUBLISHED WEEKLY BY BEADLE AND ADAMS.
No. 98 WILLIAM STREET, NEW YORK.

Price,
5 Cents.

Vol. XXVII.



"THROW OPEN THE GATE! THROW OPEN THE GATE! LET US OUTSIDE!" YELLED THE DAUNTLESS BOY.

Dauntless Dan, THE FREE-LANCE;

OR,
OLD KIT BANDY IN ARCADIA.

BY OLL COOMES,
AUTHOR OF "WHIP KING JOE," "STONEWALL BOB," "LARAMIE JOE," ETC., ETC.

CHAPTER I.

AN EQUINE DEMON.

"NOTICE!—One thousand dollars reward will be paid the man who will conquer and ride 'Demon,' a wild stallion recently captured upon the plains of New Mexico, and now in my corral at Round Vale Ranch on the Little Colorado River. Or, if preferred, the party subduing said wild horse may have the animal itself, instead of the money reward, upon certain conditions that will be made known on the day of the contest which has been fixed for September the 10th, 187—."

"RANDOLPH BURKE."

Copies of the above notice had been sent far and wide by Mr. Burke, the proprietor of Round Vale Ranch, and it was a virtual acknowledgment that, skillful horse-trainers as he and his men had the reputation of being, they had found one animal which they could not master.

And such was, in fact, the truth. In the Round Vale corral, the sole occupant of the inclosure was Demon, a coal-black stallion which had been quite recently taken wild in New Mexico. It had been driven into a canyon after all its herd had been captured, and there lassoed, and while it had been a captive more than a month its fierce spirit had not been conquered, or in any manner subdued. It had been bound and fettered until it could not move a limb, and so kept for hours, but the moment it was liberated—free to use teeth or hoofs—it did so with all the viciousness of a veritable demon.

In fact, the sight and voice of man seemed to throw the brute into fits of fury, and after two men had been killed and several wounded in attempts to subdue the beautiful, yet vicious beast, Mr. Burke conceived the idea of offering a reward to the man who had the courage and skill to conquer it.

The horse would have been shot had Mr. Burke not had a greater object in view than simply breaking the stallion—and that was the capture of Black Horse Bill, the Outlaw of the Southern Pampas. This audacious renegade had been, for two or three years, the source of great loss and annoyance to Mr. Burke and other ranchmen. Scores of horses had been stolen, and, of course, Black Horse Bill and his gang got the blame whether they got the horses or not.

In the remarkable speed of his horse lay the outlaw's safety and success. Strange as it may seem, the robber-chief was 'most always alone, and when pursued took to the open plain, where, conscious of the mettle of his splendid horse, he could defy his pursuers. But Mr. Burke was fully satisfied that Demon was the equal of the outlaw's horse in speed, for he had heard of two attempts made by the renegade to capture or run down the wild steed, in both of which he had signally failed. Singular as it may seem, both horses were black stallions, and of about the same size and build, and with Demon broken to the saddle Mr. Burke had high hopes of not only running down Black Horse Bill, but also of possessing his wonderful horse.

Burke's reward of course attracted much attention and created no little excitement among the horse-hunters and ranchmen of eastern Arizona and western New Mexico. He had received word from several noted rancheeros, long before the day fixed for the contest with the wild horse came, that they would be on hand, and so every preparation was made at Round Vale Ranch to give her expected visitors a royal reception and holiday entertainment.

The first to arrive was Colonel Jack Hermer. He came two days previous to that fixed for the contest with the Pampas steed, but came as a spectator. He had been there many times, and his appearance was always hailed with joy, for he was considered a jolly good fellow. The colonel was a man of forty years. He took no offense at being called a wealthy vagabond. He had come, an invalid, into the salubrious climate of the Southwest. Being a single man, with no cares upon his mind, and with plenty of money, he entered into the enjoyment of the wild, free life of a ranchman. He was a fine shot and an

excellent horseman, and by the time he had regained his health, he had become so attached to the mountains and plains that he had no desire to leave them.

"Well, friend Burke," the colonel said, after the two had greeted each other, "it appears that you're going to have a big time here next Thursday."

"Well, as to that I can't say, colonel," replied Burke; "if the first man who has the nerve to tackle Demon should conquer him, the exercise may be short."

"That horse must be a terror, if what I hear is true."

"He has killed two men and crippled three already. Brazos Joe was the first victim, and a braver man, or more skillful horseman never lived. From the moment Demon was captured he acted like a demon, sure enough. It was by the hardest work of days that he was brought here and turned into the corral. When Brazos concluded to subdue him, he entered the pen on horseback and undertook to lasso him, at which the brute flew at horse and rider, and in less than two minutes Brazos was dead and his horse kicked and bitten so badly that we had the animal shot. Then Mexican Pete tried his skill and met with poor Brazos's fate, and in getting his body from the corral, three more men were wounded. This ended the attempt on the part of my men to bridle Demon, and I regret now that we did not kill the vicious brute before he ever entered the corral. I do not believe he can be conquered any more than you can cure a dog of the rabies. Every man who proposes to enter that inclosure shall know just what he has to contend with, and then he can run his own risks. I want all comers to have a chance at him, so that it may not be said the horsemen of Round Vale Ranch were beaten out by an ordinary wild horse. The idea of offering the big reward occurred to me as a last expedient—not expecting the brute to be conquered, but that all who came here might see just what kind of an untamed terror he is."

"Well, they'll be here," said the colonel—"scores of them, and every fellow 'll come determined to win. But there's one thing, Mr. Burke, Black Horse Bill will not be very likely to steal Demon!"

"I wish he'd undertake it," replied Burke, "for the daring rascal has stolen no less than four horses from me since I have had Demon in the corral. It begins to look as if the black stud was possessed of some of the same devil that Black Horse Bill is, and that nothing but a bullet through the brain of each will dispossess them of it."

CHAPTER II.

THE CONTEST OPENS.

ON the same day that Colonel Hermer arrived at Round Vale people began to appear from far and near. They came in ones, and twos, and in parties; and a motley crowd they made. There were Mexicans, Spaniards, Indians, negroes and Americans. There were gamblers, hunters, mustangers and rancheeros. There were men of all ages ranging from the grizzled veteran of the ranges down to the beardless youth.

Among the latter class was one boy of perhaps eighteen or twenty, who attracted more than passing notice. He was of medium size, with a sun-bronzed face, a magnificent dark eye, long dark hair, and features decidedly prepossessing. He was dressed in a very plain suit of buckskin, somewhat after the style of the mustanger. Slung at his back was an old Belgian rifle, while a pair of immense revolvers was strapped to his waist. Coiled over his left shoulder and under his right arm was a long whip—a regular blacksnake. He was mounted upon an old, spavined pony that must have seen service for a quarter of a century.

"Well, young man, who are you, and from where do you hail?" asked one of the Round Vale "committee on reception," as the young horseman dismounted. But before he could answer a cowboy from the Williams Ranch, more than one hundred miles south, pushed his way through the crowd in front of Mr. Burke's quarters, exclaiming:

"By smoke! There's Dauntless Dan Darcy! Why, how do ye do, Free-Lance, ole boy?"

He grasped the young man's hand and shook it warmly.

It was evident enough that they were old acquaintances, and after they had talked a few moments the cowboy asked:

"Dan, are you goin' to try your hand on the mad horse?"

"If I can get the chance, Tim," replied the youth passing on through the crowd into Burke's quarters.

"Poor young fool!" said one "Dulcet" Jim, loud-mouthed ranchman; "he's probably broke a blind colt some time in his life and thinks he's a thundergust o' a hoss-tamer. Humph! by tomorrow night a more 'propriate name for Demon'll be 'Fool-Killer'; but the world won't miss sich cattle. If the boy wants to die, let him have a chance, I say."

"Look here, stranger," said the cowboy from the Williams Ranch, turning to Dulcet Jim, "you're on the wrong trail when you take that boy for a soft-snap. He lived three months at our ranch, over a year ago, and there wasn't a man in our camp that could down him with a lasso, a rifle or pistol. He's a master with all of 'em, and when it comes to handlin' a whip, why, he's just a king-pin. He can cut your name on a steer's flank with a whip. Once when we war brandin' and markin' cattle that boy—Dauntless Dan we called him, 'ca'se he don't fear nothin'—tied a fine wire to his whip-lash, mounted his pony and slit the ears of over a hundred steers with that whip and never made a miss! Oh! he's a stunner, is the young Free-Lance."

The next person to attract attention that arrived at the ranch, was Professor Joab Dilken, a famous horse-tamer and veterinary surgeon of Southern California, where he had charge of a large horse farm.

Next came four Mexican rancheeros, handsomely dressed and mounted upon spirited animals richly and gaudily caparisoned.

But the most eccentric character of all that came was a big, seven-foot, broad-shouldered, long-haired, loud-mouthed Missourian who, in answer to the usual inquiries, exclaimed:

"I'm Missouri Mike, and I've come up here to represent ole Pukedom in this 'ere Roman holiday-stud-hoss-picknick, and, what's more, I'm come to took the prize, for, gol-durn my Missouri picters if I ever see'd the mule, hoss, or horn critter that I couldn't subdoo—harness, ride, or yoke in two minutes and sixty-nine seconds by the watch! Them's me, gentlemen."

When the day and hour had arrived to enter the corral where the beautiful man-killer was confined, it was found fifteen persons wished to enter for the contest—nine of them single and six in pairs, and not one of the fifteen but believed, as he looked over the top of the stockade at the little black stallion, that he could conquer the beast.

And, owing to this self-assurance, considerable wrangling and dispute ensued as to who should enter first. Colonel Hermer, who was selected as a kind of master of ceremonies, settled the matter by having the fifteen cast lots. In doing so it fell to the big Missourian to enter the corral first.

"Yoop-ee!" the giant exclaimed, in high glee; "that virtuously settles it, boys; you'd all as well give up that you've lost the thousand dollars, for she's as good as in a St. Loo bank to my credit, and the honor o' ole Pukedom! If I can't git away with that durned ugly little critter, I never want to dimple the bosom o' ole Missouri again with my footprints. Gents, I'm ready for business; turn me into the bull-pen, and then I want jist two minutes and sixty-nine seconds to git onto that critter's back and like Joan o' A'kansaw gallop forth in ge-lorious triumph!"

A platform or bench had been constructed on the outside of the stockade high enough for the spectators, when standing thereon, to look over into the inclosure, and when Old Missouri announced himself ready, everybody was in position to witness the giant's boasted skill.

Demon was growing excited at the presence of the spectators and galloped to and fro across the inclosure, his eyes glaring, his ears laid back, and his whole frame fairly aquiver with rage.

Finally Old Missouri slipped into the stockade, with a bridle in one hand and a monster cattle-whip in the other.

"Whoa! you gol-durned little brat!" the giant exclaimed, in a hoarse, stern voice, at the same time cracking his whip in the air; "stand there, you ugly black rascal, for the conquerin' hero's come—whoa, now, you brute!"

The wild horse really showed signs of fear, and as the Missourian advanced slowly toward it, the animal seemed in doubt whether to stand still before the "conquering hero," or turn and flee. The suspense, however, was short. The stallion suddenly plunged at the giant like an infuriated demon, his mouth open and ears back.

With remarkable quickness for one so large, Missouri leaped aside and eluded the animal's charge, but, equally as quick—as if prepared for such a movement—Demon stopped, whirled, and sent his heels with lightning-like swiftness into the Missourian's side with a sound that

cracked like a pistol. But the man did not receive the full force of the kick, else he would never have known what hurt him. As it was, however, he was hurled back against the stockade near the gate, his whip dropped to the ground, and his hand fell at his side. *His arm had been broken!*

Before the horse could reach him again, the gate was thrown partly open and the giant slipped out, yelling at the top of his lungs:

"Next! Number One's knocked out in one minute and sixty-nine seconds by the watch, gol-durn my Missouri picter! Check off Number One, colonel, and call 'Two,' and then send round a carpenter, for my jib-boom's broke! Boys, I'd like to see the fun, but I must go to the shop for repairs, gol-durn my Missouri picter!"

A doctor from Vermilion Ranch was present, and into his care Old Missouri went for "repairs," while a mounted Mexican, named Juan Alveraz, rode into the stockade, lasso in hand. He was an expert horseman, and, in his gaudy attire and with his splendid mount, presented a very striking appearance as he galloped into the inclosure, amid the cheers of his friends and the shouts of the excited crowd.

Demon was now charging wildly about the corral, but the instant he caught sight of the horseman he dashed toward him, uttering a ferocious squeal.

The situation was one seldom presented to the wild-horse-catcher—the wild horse coming toward him instead of running from him, and Alveraz, acting upon the spur of the moment, threw the lasso full into the face of the wild stallion, and spurred his own horse aside.

But, quick as the Mexican's trained horse was, Demon was quicker, and Alveraz only escaped the open jaws of the vicious brute by dropping from his saddle on the opposite side of his horse and making for the gate, through which he escaped. It was nearly a half-hour before his horse was rescued from the inclosure, the mad stud seeming to have a greater enmity against his own species than against man.

Professor Dilken, the California horse-tamer, was the next man called, but failed to come to time, saying:

"Gentlemen, I have handled horses for twenty years, and think I know something of vicious brutes, but I have no desire to risk my neck in that pen with that horse, for he is mad—yes, sir, mad—like a dog with the rabies, and nothing but a bullet will ever cure him. No, I will waive my chance, and you may call the next candidate for glory."

The next man was a Mexican—Alveraz's friend. He entered the corral on horseback, and met with a more violent reception than his friend. He was a brave fellow, however, and fought the horse several moments with a show of success, but his own mount receiving a kick that broke one of its fore-legs, he was soon unhorsed and that was his death, for nothing could save him; he was kicked and stamped almost out of the semblance of man.

This death, however, apparently was of little consequence. On an Arizona horse-ranch death by violence is no infrequent thing; but there were expressions of regret that such an accident should occur so early in the day through fear that the other contestants might be scared and the exciting sport ended before all had been satisfied.

After the commotion occasioned by the death of the Mexican had somewhat subsided, the spectators began yelling for the next man to come to time.

The gate was opened a few inches and a lithe, supple figure glided into the stockade. It was the boy, Dan Darcy, and at sight of him Tim Jackson, from Williams's ranch, shouted out:

"Bully for Dauntless Dan, the Young Freelance of Old Arizona!"

"Take the child out!" yelled another, in a derisive tone.

"Let him die while a guileless kid!" added a third.

"Poor, tender young simpleton!" groaned a fourth; but heeding not their epithets and expressions of affected sympathy, Dan advanced dauntlessly, with a firm step and steady nerve, his blacksnake whip in his right hand and a navy revolver in the left!

CHAPTER III.

A STARTLING REVELATION.

THERE were very few, if any, of those who saw the slender youth enter that death-pen where so many strong, skillful men had met their fate, that believed he would ever go out alive. Still there were some who believed he intended to shoot the horse if closely pressed, and

cries of "Put down that old navy!" "No foul play!" rung from their lips, but, heeding them not, the boy advanced toward the stallion, still clutching one revolver in his left hand while the butt of a second projected several inches from his left pants pocket.

In a moment Demon was atremble with renewed rage; half-rising in the air, with a fierce squeal, he bounded direct at the daring boy with open mouth.

Dan began running backward, at the same time raising his revolver, and firing three times, in quick succession, point blank into the animal's face. The report of the weapon rung out like that of a musket, but with a peculiar dead sound that told blank cartridges had been used.

The sound of the shots, the cloud of smoke and the burnt powder from the last cartridge in its face, all were a startling surprise to the horse, and, half-blinded, it halted in its charge. That was Dan's moment to leap from before it and elude its deadly heels, as it turned round like a top and kicked at him.

Nor was the boy a moment too quick, for those deadly hoofs followed him so closely that some of the spectators believed he had been struck; but they soon learned that such was not the case, for the dauntless young tamer swung his whip about his head and struck the horse a blow upon the legs that fairly singed the hair.

Twice he repeated the terrible blows, each one cracking like a pistol; then the animal turned upon him again, but, scarcely had it started toward him before the old navy came to a level and was discharged four times into its face, the boy running swiftly backward while firing the weapon.

As before, the last shot was at such close quarters that the burnt powder was blown into the mad stallion's face, causing him to snort with pain and for a moment confusing him, which again enabled Dan to get out of the way so that when the enraged brute turned to kick, the young tamer was at a safe distance, and improved his advantage by raining blow after blow upon the black hide and legs with his stinging "blacksnake."

The spectators stood fairly quivering with surprise and suspense. So far, the boy's tactics had enabled him to remain upon the field longer than any other, but there was no sign of Demon weakening in the conflict, and it did not seem possible that the slender youth could have the strength and endurance to keep up the fight, as it had been waging.

Failing to reach the boy with his heels, Demon turned and for the third time charged upon him, and endeavored to seize him with his teeth; but, Dan had expected this and was prepared, for, dropping his empty revolver and drawing the other, as soon as the animal charged he opened his battery.

Smoke and burnt powder in his eyes and face were more than the beautiful brute could stand, and whirling, he began running backward, kicking with all vengeance.

But keeping just out of reach of his heels, Dan plied his merciless whip with such torturing precision that blood began to trickle down the animal's legs and was flung in huge drops from his heels into the boy's face. Of this, however, the daring boy took no notice. He was bent upon keeping the horse's head from him, and whenever the stallion made a move toward turning, the discharge of his revolver would frighten the beast, and the conflict of heels and whip would be renewed.

It soon became evident that Dan had gained a partial victory, at which the spectators set up a shout, but the look the boy flashed up at them—accompanied with a significant shake of the head—quickly silenced the now excited throng.

Dan had maneuvered so as to bring the horse into one corner of the stockade, and there the struggle continued. Both man and beast exerted themselves to the utmost. The perspiration rolled from Dan's face in great drops, and the stallion became white with foam.

It did not seem possible that any species of the brute creation could possess such a spirit of incarnate fury. The tiger, deprived of the freedom of his native jungle, could not have been more ferocious than that noble-looking courser of the prairies, and yet the boy evidently knew exactly how to deal with him, for ere long it was seen that the horse was weakening. Instead of backing toward the young tamer, he began to retreat into the corner of the stockade, slightly squatting as he did so.

Still the stinging whip was used about his legs, every cut seeming to burn like fire. Demon's kicking became less frequent and less wicked, yet with a mechanical regularity the merciless blacksnake rose and fell, until the ani-

mal, unable to stand such punishment, attempted to escape from the corner. This movement Dan headed off by a shot from his revolver. Then the terrified animal made a lunge at the stockade fence, as if he would go over it; but, failing in this, he endeavored to shield his legs by drawing them forward and settling down on his haunches. He ceased kicking, and his whole demeanor changed to that of abject terror. He stamped the ground with his forefeet and snorted with pain. His haunches continued to settle lower and lower until they were almost upon the ground.

Then Dan thrust his revolver into his pocket, gathered up his whip-lash, darted forward, and, to the amazement of the spectators, leaped astride the cowering horse's back!

A wild shout burst from the lips of the spectators.

With a snort of rage and fear Demon leaped straight into the air; then whirled and dashed away at a furious speed across the inclosure—first in one direction and then another.

"Throw open the gate! throw open the gate! Let us outside!" yelled the dauntless boy, in tones heard by all.

The great gate was quickly thrown open, and, like an arrow, the animal shot through it, his rider lying forward upon his neck to elude the cross-beam above. But the instant they were outside the boy glanced back, waved his whip in the air and shouted:

"Good-by, folks! I'll take the horse instead of the money!"

The last words came faintly, for, like the wind, the wild horse was flying up the level valley toward the east.

For several moments the crowd stood motionless, speechless, and watched the fleeing forms of horse and rider. They saw a strange horseman coming down the valley, and as Dauntless Dan swept past him, they saw the horseman turn quickly in his saddle and fire shot after shot at the fleeing boy.

"Who in Heaven's name is that trying to shoot the boy?" cried Randolph Burke, in amazement and anger.

"Some fellow that must think the youngster is an escaping criminal," answered Colonel Hermer; "but we'll soon see, for he's hurrying on this way."

As the horseman approached he was recognized as Mace Whipple, a cowboy belonging to a neighboring ranch. He appeared in great excitement, and as he galloped up, yelled:

"Why did you allow that fellow to escape?"

"Why, we'd no reason to keep him here if he didn't want to stay," answered Burke.

"You didn't, eh? Did he win that wild stallion?" demanded Whipple.

"He conquered the animal to the extent you see, and as he left shouted back that he'd take the horse instead of the money."

"Well, by the everlastin' gods!" exclaimed the excited cowboy, in apparent astonishment, "you fellers must be a Lunatic Asylum out on holiday parade!"

"Mace Whipple, what do you mean?" peremptorily demanded Burke.

"What do I mean?" retorted Whipple; "why, gentlemen, the very outlaw critter that you expected to run down and bring to justice with that black stallion has ridden him away! That boy was no one else on earth but Black Horse Bill, the Outlaw Ranger!"

CHAPTER IV.

ARCADIA RANCH.

IN the center of a lovely little valley, nearly surrounded by lofty and picturesque mountains, was located the horse-ranch of Dr. John Vance. Around the base of the hills was a fringe of timber. A little stream roaring down from the mountains swept gayly through the valley and out into the open plain, finally mingled its waters with those of the Little Colorado River. No more romantic spot could have been found in all the land. The doctor's daughter, India, had named it Arcadia Ranch; and not alone was the place noted for its natural beauty and scenery, but for the hospitality of its owner, his fair daughter and his niece, Charlotte Reed.

Dr. Vance was a man of fifty years—a great, kind-hearted and generous soul who had been well-bred, and educated for the profession; but, bowed down with grief at the loss of his wife, he had sought the seclusion of the mountains and plains.

At first he had no thought of exposing his daughter to the hardships and privations of this border life, but he soon found it impossible to live apart from her, and, at India's urgent

request, she was taken to his mountain home, accompanied by her cousin, Miss Reed, who, by the recent death of her father, had been left an orphan.

At the time of which I write India Vance was a girl of seventeen. She was a dark-eyed, intelligent and vivacious little maiden—a perfect model of health and beauty. She was a superb equestrienne, a capital shot with rifle and pistol, and, withal, a model housekeeper and a most genial hostess.

Her cousin, Lotta, as she was called, was one year her senior. She was a slender, graceful girl—less demonstrative than India, but a lovely, gentle being with all the attributes of a pure womanhood.

Many persons had protested against the doctor's permitting the girls to live in the midst of the many dangers that surrounded Arcadia Ranch—dangers that the two maidens' beauty and innocence would enhance. But, in traveling over the great Southwest, the doctor had found fair and lovely women at many of the most exposed ranches, and with extra precautions, he could see no reason why he could not protect his daughter and niece from dangers no greater than others.

Naturally enough, the maidens had many admirers among the ranchmen, not only of Arcadia, but of the many other horse and cattle-ranches in that region; and not a few were the rancheeros who came, and often, to stop over night at Arcadia. But the most regular of all comers was Colonel Jack Hermer, the "wealthy vagabond," whom we have already met at Round Vale Ranch. It was noticed that he paid considerable attention to India, and it was also observed that the doctor looked upon his visits with much favor. But if India cared more for him than for any of her father's guests she concealed the fact with woman's cleverness.

One bright September day Dr. Vance, his daughter and niece were seated upon the broad porch from which a fair view of the valley and its outlet could be commanded, engaged in conversation. Besides two ranchmen at work out about the stables, and Old Ham, the negro cook, not another person was about. Most of the Arcadia's men had been given leave-of-absence to attend the wild-horse contest at Round Vale, about thirty miles down the Colorado valley.

The doctor fully realized the peril of the situation should an attack be made upon the ranch by Indians or outlaws, from whom there was, at all times, possible danger. He had already suffered by the depredations of the notorious Black Horse Bill in the loss of several fine horses; and while there were no Indians in the immediate vicinity, there was no telling what day or hour the ubiquitous old Geronimo or some of the "bad Indians" from the Reservation might sweep down upon them. Even while the three sat on the porch, talking about the absence of so many of the men, a horseman was seen to enter the valley from the plain and ride furiously toward them.

"Who can that be?" the doctor exclaimed, knitting his brows, and gazing steadily at the approaching horseman. "I am sure it is not one of my men."

"He rides a black horse, father," announced India, whose keen sight enabled her to distinguish the color of the animal.

"And so they say does Black Horse Bill."

"Ay, but he is alone."

"The way the outlaw mostly rides, daughter; but whoever he may be, there is something wrong, else he would not ride so like a madman."

"Uncle," said Lotta, who had brought a field-glass from the house and scanned the horseman, "he rides without either bridle or saddle. His head is bare, and his hair flying like banners—he is a stranger—verily, a madman, indeed."

"We will soon know who he is, for he is approaching fast."

Rapidly the unknown swept up the smooth valley. The clatter of his horse's hoof-strokes finally fell upon the ears of the eager watchers, and then he was near enough for all to see with the eye, unaided, that he rode without caparison—that his head was bare—his horse streaked with foam, and the hot breath coming like steam from the animal's nostrils.

Involuntarily the two girls shrunk nearer the doctor, in vague fear and suspense.

Nearer and nearer came the unknown. As he approached the ranch he made no effort toward checking the speed of his horse, but startled the doctor and the ladies by suddenly throwing himself from the animal's back to the ground, landing squarely upon his feet within

twenty feet of the porch, while the horse ran on with a new burst of speed at being relieved of its rider, into the timber at the head of the valley.

Hatless, and with his clothes covered with dust of the plains, his hair disheveled and his face streaked with perspiration, and splashed with drops of coagulated blood, the young stranger advanced, and bowing to the doctor and maidens, quickly said, addressing Vance:

"Sir, you are in danger!"

At sound of his voice India uttered a little cry, and springing from the porch she ran toward the youth, exclaiming:

"Oh, Dan! Is it you indeed? What has happened?"

"India!" exclaimed the doctor, in a stern voice, following her up and grasping her arm, "what do you mean? Who is this stranger you greet thus?"

"Father—" India began, but the youth interrupted her, saying:

"Doctor Vance, my name is Daniel Darcy. Let that suffice for the present. You are in danger!"

"What do you mean, boy?"

"I need not tell you, sir; you can see for yourself."

As he spoke Dauntless Dan, for he the horseman was, pointed down the valley whence he had come, where no less than a score of mounted savages—real Apaches—could now be seen riding swiftly toward the ranch.

"My God!" cried the doctor, "are they really savages?"

A yell from the Apaches answered him, and at the same time sent a chill of horror through his very soul.

Hearing the red-skins yell, the ranchmen at work at the stables hurried in.

"We must barricade the house and defend ourselves," said the doctor, coolly, like a man of nerve.

"But, sir, they will burn you out," Dauntless Dan declared.

"If they fire the buildings we can cheat the flames. Will you join us, young man?"

"Most assuredly, sir, I will," replied the boy, proudly.

All hastened inside the house. The doors and windows were closed and barred. In building the house it had been provided with port-holes for just such an emergency, and now four of these were quickly opened for the first time.

The doctor was well supplied with firearms of the most improved pattern. Dauntless Dan was furnished one of the best rifles, with a belt filled with cartridges; also with a pair of revolvers.

Taking a position where he could watch the approaching foe, Dan waited, with cocked rifle, the opportunity for a shot.

It soon came, and for the first time Arcadia Valley resounded with the report of a rifle fired with deadly intent at a human being. And as the gun rung out, Dr. Vance, who was watching through a port-hole, exclaimed:

"Ay, lad! you know how to handle a gun. You unhorsed a red-skin in fine style. You have fought Indians before, I dare say."

"Yes, sir," the boy answered, preparing for a second shot; but, warned of their danger by the death of their warrior, the Apaches swung off and took refuge behind the stockade.

"The red imps are not going to risk their red carcasses any further," decided Dan.

"That makes the situation worse than if they'd boldly attacked us here," said Lasso Jim, an athletic young ranchman of about five-and-twenty.

"Yes, if they resort to fire," replied the doctor, "but in that case we have the tunnel."

"Then you have a secret passage from your house?" Dan asked.

"A tunnel runs from the cellar back five hundred feet to the base of the bluff."

"But, doctor, what if we should be discovered after we emerge from the passage?" asked Jake Nelson, the other ranchman, a man of forty years.

"In that case it would be war to the knife, but then if we are permitted to remain here until we can have the cover of night under which to escape from the valley, I will have no fears of immediate discovery. But it looks now as though that wild-horse contest at Round Vale would prove a serious affair for us."

"Why so, Mr. Vance?" asked Dauntless Dan.

"Because it has taken most of my men away."

"But it brought you warning of danger, at least, in time to save you a surprise, and, also,

what little help I may be able to give you," marked Dan.

"I do not understand you," the doctor replied.

"I was at the Round Vale horse contest," Dan explained, "and won the prize—the mad horse—and rode it away. From the moment it dashed out of the stockade I was never off its back until I alighted in front of your house. Straight from Round Vale I came here, or rather the horse, given his own course without bridle or saddle, came in this direction. Ten miles from here I detected the Apaches, also coming in this direction. I thought of you at once. I knew, or feared, at least, that they were coming to raid your ranch, and determined to ride here and warn you of your danger. But it was with difficulty I kept out of reach of the savages and guided my bridleless and untrained horse. It took such a wide circuit that I was afraid the Indians would cut me off from Arcadia Valley."

"Then you knew exactly where my ranch was located?"

"Yes, sir."

"And how does it come, India," demanded the father, turning to his daughter, "that you know this young man, and no one else here does?"

A deep silence fell upon the little party. A crimson, tell-tale flush suffused the fair India's face; she raised her dark eyes and was about to speak when Old Ham, the negro cook, came storming in from the kitchen where he had been left on guard, roaring out:

"Oh, Massa Vance! dem bloody, red niggahs have fired de stables and stacks, and de smoke and fire am jus' climbin' into de sky like destruction!"

"True," said the doctor, glancing out through a port-hole, "the stables and sheds are in flames and now we must prepare to do or die!"

CHAPTER V.

PALACE OF PLUTO.

It was generally known throughout Western New Mexico and Eastern Arizona that there was a band of outlaws known as "Pluto's Gang" located somewhere in the mountain fastnesses, but for over two years, every effort to find the rendezvous of these freebooters had proved a failure. Some believed that Captain Pluto and Black Horse Bill acted in concert—that the latter was Pluto's scout and general skirmisher, with his headquarters in the saddle, and that saddle on a horse whose speed had defied that of every animal ever ridden in pursuit of him.

But in a deep, dark mountain gorge, its threshold swept by the rushing waters of the Little Colorado River, was the hiding-place of the outlaws—the Palace of Pluto, as it was named by the robbers themselves. It was a great cavern in the hills which could be entered only from the river, and even to reach it, then, the stream must be entered half a mile above or below the cave, and the entire distance then traversed through swift-running waters beneath which there were thousands of dangerous pitfalls that only an experienced guide could avert.

Into the Palace of Pluto I must, for a time, conduct the reader. It is day without, yet lamps are burning in the cavern to dispel the gloom that is there eternal. All of the band are not at home, yet seven men are sitting and reclining within the radius of light, playing cards and cracking jokes. Captain Pluto is not present—in fact, it has been many months since he left the cave, but daily, almost, he communicates by messenger with his trusted men.

The youngest of those present could not have been over thirty years of age, yet, judging by his talk and his features, he was the most hardened villain of the party, although there was an elderly man—a tall, angular and grotesque-looking fellow wearing green goggles that claimed the unholy honor of having seen more years in the disreputable service than any one present. The young man was known among the "gang" as Vampire Lute, and the old man as Tom Floater.

The latter name had been suggested by the circumstance under which the old sinner had become a member of Pluto's Gang. One stormy night the sentinel at the mouth of the cavern heard a cry of distress come from up the river. He gave the alarm, when two men were at once dispatched up the gorge to make an investigation. In a few minutes they returned, bringing with them the limp and half-lifeless body of an old man whom they had found lashed to a log, floating down the river.

After liberal draughts of liquor, the stran-

ger regained his senses, and after he had been assured that he was safe within the Palace of Pluto, whether friend or foe, he unlimbered his tongue and never did his auditors hear such a stream of twaddle fall from human lips. Out of it all they learned that he had been, most of his life a road-agent and horse-thief, that he had been pursued and caught by two men whom he supposed were Vigilantes, tied to a log and tossed into the river to be dashed to death in the gorge.

The old fellow was at once dubbed Tom Floater, and by his request, and after ample proof of his having been a member of the fraternity in the days past, he was accepted into Pluto's band, and soon proved himself a skillful and fertile-brained old reprobate, in a raid made on a Mexican ranch in the southern part of the Territory.

As before stated, the outlaws were playing cards and telling stories, when I introduce the reader into Pluto's Palace; but, in the midst of their sport they were interrupted by the guard, who announced the approach of a man from down the river—one of their own number who had been absent.

In a moment every outlaw was on his feet. The man proved to be a messenger from Captain Pluto with a message to Vampire Lute, who was "boss" at the cave when the chief was away.

"Well, what word does the captain send, señor?" questioned Vampire; "where did you leave him?"

"Left him at Round Vale Ranch," answered the messenger, "waitin' to see how that wild-hoss affair comes out."

"Confound that wild horse! I wish they'd kill it," declared one "Clinker" Pete; "for if they break the brute, and then run Black Horse Bill down with it, 'it'll be all the wuss for we fellows."

"Why so, Clinker?" asked Vampire.

"'Cause, while we've been doin' the stealing of hosses and robbing of stages, hasn't Bill got all the blame? Hasn't every raid we've made the last year or two been laid on him and his little gang o' rangers? I'd give a section o' Old Mexico to know who that Black Horse Bill is, and just what the varmint's up to! But, go on, Sonora, and tell us what the captain wants."

"He wants Vampire and two men to meet him to-morrow, or next day, at Red Needle Rock, prepared to do some fancy work. I think he's got his eye on Arcadia Ranch, and means to handle some calico, though I'm not sure o' that; it's only my surmise. At any rate, he wants you to be within call of Red Needle by to-morrow noon. And, another thing: he says for every mother's imp of you to look sharp, for he's got wind of the wust old sleuth-hound on this mud-ball bein' in these mountains, and maybe in search of the rendezvous of 'Pluto's Gang.'"

"Who do you mean? General Crook, or Old Geronimo?"

"Wuss than them; it's Old Kit Bandy, the Mountain Detective."

"Great, roarin' avalanches!" cried Old Tom Floater, "is it possible that ole leper has drifted in this direction?"

"That's the report, and they say he never quit a case in his life until he'd run her down to death," replied Sonora.

"Mortify his picters!" snarled Floater; "I know he's wuss than a guilty conscience to hang on to a case, and wuss nor the black vomit when he gits his claws onto a feller. Oh! I know Kit Bandy, gents! I'm obleeged to him, I am, for three-years' retirement in the State institution at Denver for takin' advantage o' the pokyness o' the Government Mint to do a little coinin' o' silver myself, and he'll swell the resources o' the country. But, a man's effort to serve his country is never 'preciated 'less he be a Congresser or New York alderman. Dod darn Kit Bandy, boys; he must be abolished. The very name makes me feel choky-suffocatin'."

"Then if you know Bandy, Floater," said Vampire, "I'll take you along with me to Red Needle—you and Clinker."

"It's a go, Vam!" exclaimed the old outlaw; "nothin' 'll please me better'n to git out whar I can kick over a mountain, or smash a dozen or two Vigilantes, or pound the puddin' outen an acre o' grizzlies. Desperation's been 'cumulatin' in me the last month bigger'n a tropical hurricane, and when I git out whar thar's room, and I onchain myself, boys, you'll feel the old hills quake, and see the gravel dance down the slopes, and hear the mountain peaks clank together."

Early the next morning the three men left the

cave and started for Red Needle Rock. They went on horseback, the band being well supplied with horses which they kept in the cave during the day and took out to feed at night. They also went disguised. Besides his green goggles, Old Floater wore a wig and false whiskers, which gave him the appearance of a gorilla.

It was many miles to Red Needle, yet the outlaws rode slowly along, keeping a sharp watch around them. They were about five miles from their destination when, on turning a sharp angle in the pass, they suddenly came face to face with an old man dressed in the garb of a mountain hunter, and mounted upon a jaded-looking horse.

"Kit Bandy!" burst from Vampire's lips the very instant his eyes fell upon him, and scarcely had he uttered the name before Old Floater had the horseman covered with two revolvers and shouted out:

"Throw up your paddies, Kit Bandy, or by yonder eternal hills I'll riddle your anatomy! Throw up or die, you old rotten-headed mountain rat!"

CHAPTER VI.

THE VALOROUS OLD FLOATER UNMASKED.

THE old mountaineer was completely taken by surprise, and, readily seeing his predicament, drew rein and threw up his hands, saying:

"Easy there, strangers, for you've got the drap on the wrong pilgrim; I'm not Kit Bandy by a long shot."

"That's too vapory, old man," retorted Vampire; "we know you, and you needn't go back on your illustrious old name. We've been lookin' for you."

"I do deny bein' Kit Bandy," persisted the borderman; "my name is Rattler—Old Tom Rattler, hunter o' game and not men, and if you're out gunnin' for Kit Bandy, you'll have to look furdur. I deny the allegation and defy the alligator."

"Bah! it's nateral enuff you'd say all that, seein' you war caught foul, you ole rat," retorted Floater.

"You're the same critter as 'lected me to a stone-pile at Denver for a term of three years onc't. I know you, you ole man-thief, from 'way back, and you'd as well onhorse yerself, review yer record, and prepare to close accounts with your Maker. Dismount, Bandy, or I'll fire, for I'm a bad mess to tamper with, I am!"

"By the great Rosycrusians!" exclaimed the old hunter, "I'll climb down; but I tell you I'm not Kit Bandy, and the man that says I am never see'd old Kit, or else is a unmitigated liar. I'm Tom Rattler, and if you'll give me a fair shake I'll prove what I say."

"Court's now in session; present yer proof," cried Floater.

"No snap judgment, gents," responded Rattler.

The outlaws dismounted, and advancing to the old man, quickly disarmed him. He was then searched for proof of his identity, but they found nothing. However, they insisted that he was Bandy. Floater's evidence was sufficient, and yet Floater was in favor of taking him a prisoner to Pluto's Palace. But Vampire and Clinker were in favor of shooting him on the spot, and thus end the matter—relieve them of an encumbrance, as well as the possibility of his escape. And, as they were in the majority, it was decreed that the old traveler be shot then and there, hit or miss; so his hands were at once bound and everything made ready for the summary execution.

"Now, ole feller," said Vampire, "if you've anything to say before you enter eternity, why, say it, and we'll shoot you just as neatly as we can. Out with it, Bandy, for time is precious. You're old enough to quit the cares o' this cruel world, anyhow, be you Bandy or not."

"I've nothin' to say," replied the old man, "cept that if you'll give me a show I'll fight the hull three o' you, and if I git licked it'll be nobody's fault but mine."

"Bah! git out! We're not boys!" sneered Vampire.

"Say, pards," spoke up Floater, "s'pose we run the man in and give him a show. Since I've come to take a clost look I don't believe he is Kit Bandy. If I remember now, Kit war a taller man and not so infernal ugly. Let's run him into the Palace."

"No, sir, he shall die right here!" emphatically declared Vampire; "we've no time to fool away, and I'm surprised that an old earthquake and grizzly pounder that you proclaimed yerself to be, Floater, should weaken like a wet rag when a little nerve war required."

"Vampire, you shall not shoot that old man," exclaimed Floater, in a tone that caused Rattler to start, and taking out his knife he cut the hunter's bonds.

"What do you mean, sir?" thundered Vampire, his face growing black with rage.

"I mean what I say," replied Floater, covering Vampire and Clinker with his two revolvers, his little eyes flashing like coals of fire; "you shall not slay old Tommy Rattler, for, by the gods, I'll inform you now that I, Old Floater, am Ka-ristopher Ko-lumbus Bandy hisself, and you are my prisoners! You've forced me to unmask, and, by the horn o' Joshua! if you move a muscle till I bid you, I'll drill a Hoosic Tunnel through your carcasses!"

CHAPTER VII.

RED MARAUDERS.

VAMPIRE and Clinker were completely dumfounded, yea, paralyzed by Old Floater's sudden revelation of his true character. In the blaze of the old man's eye, the change of his voice, and the whole and sudden transformation of his entire being they were convinced that he spoke the truth—that he was indeed Old Kit Bandy.

Never had men been so deceived. Never had Tom Floater once been suspected of duplicity. The manner in which he had gained entrance to the Palace of Pluto; the knowledge he possessed of the secret signs and grips of the organized bands of robbers, and the zeal with which he took part in a raid on a Mexican horse-ranch had all been satisfactory evidence of his assumed character.

Old Rattler, recognized his friend's voice the moment he assumed his natural tone, and exclaimed:

"Kit Bandy, by the great Rosycrusians!"

"Business fust, Thomas," replied the redoubtable old detective, keeping his eyes and revolvers on his late companions; "advance, Rattler, and relieve my chums o' their fightin'-tools."

Rattler took his own revolver, now hanging in his belt on the horn of Vampire's saddle, and pointing it at Clinker's breast, said:

"Shed that belt, ole feller, in a hurry!"

Clinker unbuckled his belt and dropped it at his feet.

"Do likewise, Vampire!" commanded Bandy, turning both his revolvers on that worthy.

Vampire unloosened his belt, which dropped at his feet.

Rattler took up the two belts and buckled both around his own person.

Like abject cowards, which they really were in the face of danger, the two outlaws grew pale with apprehension. They expected no mercy.

"Now, Kitsie," said Rattler, "shuck off your disguise and let me behold your lovely old face once more."

Bandy removed his disguise and thrust it into the bosom of his shirt.

"The same charmin' ole fraud!" Rattler exclaimed; "the same physiog w'ot shakes a church-steeple wi' ager w'en ye looks at it!" taking Kit's hand; "and glad am I to meet you!"

"And here, too," responded Kit, "you old border buccaneer!"

"Kitsie, you're the same old, lily-lipped hummer of eighty years ago—the same old scornor o' the truth, the same old geometrical fraud;—but, how've you been? How's yer fambly? How's old Sabina?" and Rattler grinned maliciously.

"I'm in select health and classic spirits;—been a guest at the Palace o' Pluto the last six months, and lived like a real, royal prince. The folks there never once caught on, or I reckon they'd made me smoke."

"Catch on to your deception, Kitsie?" exclaimed Rattler; "not much! If you have a half a show you'll fool St. Peter and pass into heaven as an angel o' perfection. Why, you're Old Fraud hisself; and, Mr. Vampire, I don't wonder you're surprised and all broke up. That man Bandy can play any character, from a minister o' the gospel down to a goggle-eyed outlaw. He's the brass and deception to force hisself into Yale College, and pass hisself off as a perffessor o' mathematics, and run the shop a week before the others 'd find out he didn't know 'B' from bull's-foot. Them's the kind o' a philosopher and scientist Kit Bandy is, and you fellers mind what I tell you, you'll never see him in Hades—no, sir! He'll fool the old devil too slick. But, for all his faults, I love the old beauty. He's got a multitude of good things 'bout him, and when it comes to fightin' he's the idol o' my heart."

"Curses upon the treacherous hound!" Vampire hissed; "he is not out of the woods yet, neither has he destroyed Pluto's band! You may hang us, Kit Bandy, but remember that, after the judgment, comes death for such as you, you old traitor!"

"Stranger," remarked Rattler, "you talk like a dictionary man, but if you'd 'a' let me alone—taken my word—you'd not be in the fix you're in. And you'd as well try to intimidate a vulture in the air by winkin' at it as Old Kit Bandy. I've see'd him tried. He's as skeerless as a sone lion."

"I'm sorry I had to unmask as soon as I did, Vampire," Bandy observed, "for I was havin' a reg'ler Roman holiday at the Palace with you folks. But now, you'll have to go along with me. I don't want to kill you on the spot, nor I don't want you to git back to the Palace, for I may want to go back there again myself, and as only you boys know o' my little joke, I may still pass as Old Tom Floater. And say, Rattler, I'd be glorified to have you for a chum for a few days."

"Seein' we hav'n't met before for a year I don't keer if I do poke around with you a day or two, just to have some old-time fun. You're a kind o' storm-center, Kitsie, round which Ingin whirlwinds and outlaw cyclones caper and gyrate, and if I stay in the current a day or two I'll git my old sluggish blood toned up ag'in by some o' our old-time thunder-gustian exercise. Yes, put me down for a few days' romp with you, Kitsie. I'll cheerfully give you the benefit o' my experience and truth-inspirin' influence; and if thar's any fancy work you want done, jist name it and see Old Epidemic sling on the colors like an evenin' rainbow, or a maiden's poem on spring, or a—"

"By the horn o' Joshua! Rattler, there's a job now! Mix yer colors, old pard, and daub her on without regard to rainbow tints, or maidens' dreams!" and as he spoke he pointed up the pass, where no less than a score of mounted savages had appeared, coming toward them at a breakneck speed, with murder in their hearts. They were Apaches, and at a glance Bandy and Rattler saw that some ranch had already suffered at the red despoilers' hands, for several of the warriors were rigged out in articles of female costume which were boldly displayed as spoils of their fiendish work.

The foremost warrior—evidently the leader—wore a lady's white hat, to which were attached long blue and red ribbons that streamed out gayly in the wind. Another had a red sash tied around his left arm, and a ribbon on the right. The next wore a white ostrich plume in his head-gear. Another had on a blue velvet basque, the back side in front, and still another wore a lady's riding-hat perched on the back of his peaked head like a drunken bummer's chapeau.

"My God, Rattler!" exclaimed Bandy, at sight of this evidence of plundered homes; "I am afraid the red devils have massacred the people of Arcadia Ranch! But come, pard, we must run, and fight as we go. Into your saddles, prisoners, if you would save your scalps!"

The outlaws waited for no further orders. With the help of their captors they mounted their horses. They had as much to fear of the Apaches as Bandy and Rattler, for those savages' hands were ever raised against all pale-faces.

Kit and Rattler vaulted into their saddles, and with the prisoners turned to flee. A demoniac war-whoop burst from the lips of the savages, and was immediately followed by the murderous crash of firearms and the whistle of bullets through the air. Bandy's horse leaped forward and fell dead, his rider with a groan sinking at his side—motionless, as if killed outright. Both the outlaws tumbled from their horses—none but Old Rattler escaping the murderous volley unharmed.

Satisfied that Bandy was dead, for he moved not, Rattler turned in his saddle and sent back a shot at the red-skins, tumbling from his pony the warrior with the jaunty little "plug" hat, and then sped on down the pass, pursued by the entire band of infuriated human tigers, now fired to frenzy by the death of their comrade.

CHAPTER VIII.

ADRIFT IN THE MOUNTAINS.

We left Dr. Vance and his friends preparing to flee from Arcadia Ranch. Their preparations were soon made. They could take but

few things besides their weapons, a supply of ammunition, some food, and a blanket for each of the party.

When all were ready, Dr. Vance, with a lighted lantern, descended into the cellar, followed by the girls, Old Ham with his bag of provisions, the two ranchmen and Dan Darcy bringing up the rear.

The cellar had been walled with stone. There was no sign of a door in the sides, but, advancing to one corner, the doctor began removing some loose stones, disclosing the dark mouth of the tunnel. As he took the stones out he pitched them into the passage, so that they could be replaced after all were in the tunnel, and thereby conceal their means of escape. As soon as the opening was large enough to admit of the passage of the largest person, the doctor asked:

"Who now will go ahead while I remain behind and replace the stone in the wall?"

"I will," promptly answered Dan, and the boy at once glided into the dark tunnel.

He was followed by Lasso Jim and Nelson; then came the maidens, then Old Ham—the doctor last.

A halt was made until Vance had replaced the stones in the wall, then at a signal from him they began groping their way along the dismal, moldy passage. In a few minutes the end was reached. A thick covering of vines choked the opening, but these Dan gently pushed aside, and, rising to his feet, peered out. He found the spot surrounded with a clump of trees, well screened from sight of the savages. He listened. He heard the roaring, crackling flames, and the excited voices of the Apaches round and about the buildings.

Springing from the passage he assisted India and Lotta out, and soon the entire party stood grouped among the trees, talking in low tones, anxiety and fear depicted upon each face.

"Now we must make our way through these hills the best we can over into Trail Canyon," Dr. Vance said.

"I know a way from here," replied Dan Darcy, "that will be a safe one, though somewhat tedious."

"Then you have been here before?" the doctor remarked, transferring his glance from the boy to India, as if in the maiden's face he expected to detect proof of what he had suspected. "Yes, sir," answered the handsome, manly youth; "I knew these parts before ever this valley knew Arcadia Ranch."

"Lead the way, Dan, and we will discuss other matters when we are further from those murderous savages," the doctor said.

Into a narrow, dark and winding defile Dan led the way. The passage was more like a great crack or fissure in the hills than a defile, and at times it was difficult to crowd through between the walls. But moving on as fast as possible they finally felt the assurance that they were beyond immediate danger, and stopped for a few minutes' rest.

"Doctor," Dan Darcy observed, "that tunnel was a clever dodge. I do not know how we would have fared had it not been for it, and if the red-skins do not get into the house and discover our means of escape before the building is burnt down, they will think we perished in the flames. They will not be apt to tarry there long through fear of the soldiers, who, perchance, may be in pursuit of them."

"Yes, perchance," replied the doctor, with a tinge of sarcasm; "that's well said, my young friend; the soldiers may, perchance, be after them, but there is no likelihood of their ever catching up with them. Geronimo's savages have been followed over half this Territory by ruined ranges and festering corpses of white men, women and children; and yet that arm of the Government—the military—has been unable to check and punish that handful of savages."

"Don't you think, father, that Black Horse Bill, the outlaw-ranger, has something to do in inciting the Indians to hostilities?" asked India.

"It is very likely, my child; and there is another case in which a handful of daring men boldly defies the authorities—I mean Black Horse Bill. But, by the way, Dan, when we saw you enter Arcadia Valley on a black horse we, or I, at least, concluded we were to have a call from Black Horse Bill."

Dan smiled, and running his fingers over his temple and through his long hair, said:

"The conclusion was natural enough, seeing I rode a horse that is said to be a dead match in every respect for this alleged outlaw's famous black racer. I am sorry I had to part with him so soon, but if the Indians do not get him I

may recover him before he escapes back into the open plain."

"I hope so, Dan."

Continuing their retreat the party moved on until the shadows of night forced them to stop, and selecting a favorable spot they went into camp.

Since Dan had shown himself to be an experienced mountaineer and careful guide, the care of the camp was given into his hands, and with the assistance of Lasso Jim and Jake Nelson a close watch was kept over all till morning.

After breakfasting on bread and cold meats it was decided to send a couple of men back to Arcadia Valley and ascertain the state of affairs there, and if found favorable, under any circumstances, for all to retrace their steps to the valley where they would be more likely to meet with friends and succor than by pursuing their present course.

Lasso Jim and Nelson were the two selected for the trip and they at once took their departure.

Anxiously and in dire suspense was their return awaited. It was quite noon when they got back, but to the happy surprise of Dr. Vance they were accompanied by no less a personage than Colonel Jack Hermer, who with a single friend, happened to arrive at the ruins of Arcadia Ranch while the doctor's two men were there, and who, upon learning the whereabouts of the doctor and the girls, sent his man with his horse around to meet him in Trail Canyon while he proceeded on foot with the ranchmen across lots to where the doctor was in waiting.

The colonel was given a warm reception by the doctor and a friendly greeting by the maidens; but sad, indeed, were they when they learned that their ranch and home was a mass of smoldering ruins.

Dauntless Dan was not present when the ranchmen with Hermer returned. He had gone off down the defile in search of water of which the party was greatly in need, and when the doctor saw him returning he said to Hermer:

"There comes our young guide—the dauntless youth who has so greatly aided us in our escape from the savages."

"Your men were telling me of him," the colonel replied; "he is the young man that conquered the wild horse, Demon, yesterday; but do you know, doctor, that he is—"

Here the colonel leaned forward and whispered something in the doctor's ear that caused him to start like one confronted by a sudden horror.

"Colonel, you are surely mistaken!" he cried.

"No, doctor, I am not," Hermer insisted, "and you are no doubt being led into a trap worse than the one from which you escaped yesterday."

"Then, by heavens, he shall be arrested!" the doctor declared, and turning to Lasso Jim he said: "Jim, arrest that boy when he comes up and we will disarm and bind him most securely, the cunning rascal!"

All unconscious of what was in waiting for him, Dauntless Dan came up, saluted Colonel Hermer, and turned to speak with the doctor, when Lasso Jim, presenting a pistol at the youth's head, said:

"Mister Dan, consider yourself under arrest!"

"For what?" exclaimed the boy, in deep surprise.

"For being Black Horse Bill, the Outlaw Ranger!"

CHAPTER IX.

DAN IN DURESS.

DAN DARCY started back, his dark, brown eyes flashing, his breast heaving with the indignation of a wounded, sensitive spirit. Fixing his gaze upon Colonel Hermer, he said:

"I presume, sir, you make that charge against me?"

"That," spoke up Dr. Vance, "is Colonel Jackson Hermer."

"I know him," responded Dan, his white lips curling slightly with scorn; "I saw him the other day at Round Vale Ranch; but, doctor, he cannot sustain the charge he makes."

"Oh, Dan!" cried India, "there is surely some mistake! I do not believe you are Black Horse Bill!"

"Thank you, Miss India," replied the boy, his demeanor quickly changing; "out of respect for you and your friendship, I can afford to submit to arrest; but I say, emphatically, that if that gentleman makes the charge direct, it is upon

false evidence—he means to injure me for some purpose or other."

"Come, come, Dan!" said the doctor, "there is no need of exciting language. You shall have a chance to prove your innocence, I assure you."

"All right, doctor," replied the boy, "but you may need my services before the trial."

"Ah! an implied threat!" sneered Colonel Hermer.

"What do you mean, boy?" demanded Vance.

"No difference, doctor; I see you are all against me—"

"No, not all," interrupted India, her dark eyes flashing in a mist of tears.

"India! India!" said the father reprovingly, "let that suffice, daughter."

Dan was disarmed and his hands tied at his back. India took his cartridge-belt and buckled it around her own slender waist, then shouldering his carbine, said:

"I will take charge of his weapons, and if need be, I can use them."

By advice of Colonel Hermer, who informed the doctor that he had sent a man around with horses to meet them in Trail Canyon, the party continued on its westward course.

Lasso Jim now took the lead, Jake Nelson following with Dan Darcy in custody.

Colonel Hermer, walking with India, followed behind. The two discussed the situation, its perils, and the possibility of their escape from the hills. Finally, when far enough behind to be out of hearing of the others, India asked:

"Colonel, are you positive of your own knowledge that Dauntless Dan is Black Horse Bill?"

"Well—no," the colonel admitted; "but the charge was made against him yesterday at Round Vale Ranch by a reliable man—a man who knew him so well that he fired several shots at him. But the discovery was not made until the last moment—until the young outlaw—mounted upon the wild-horse, Demon, was riding out of the ranch at the top of the horse's speed. From what Lasso Jim tells me, the young rascal must have come straight from Round Vale to Arcadia."

"He admitted that he did," said India.

"He's a bold, daring, dashing young scamp."

"All but the latter, colonel; I do not believe yet that he is the Outlaw Ranger," was India's sharp retort.

"India?" said the colonel, his voice falling almost to a whisper, "has that young man turned your head—won your affections?"

"He has won my admiration, I can assure you, by his gallantry and gentlemanly bearing," answered India, decisively.

"The greatest rogues the world ever saw were, in outward appearance, the most polished gentlemen. But, India, I wish to speak of another matter to you. I do not want to take advantage of your present perilous situation to exact anything of you, but nothing would please me more than to have an answer—a favorable answer to the question I have asked you so often before. You know your father favors my suit and has encouraged me in visiting Arcadia Ranch."

"Colonel Hermer," said India, "to be honest with you, I will say this: as a gentleman, and my father's friend, I hold you in high esteem, but I do not love you, consequently I could not marry you."

"But, India, you could learn—" the colonel began, but his words were cut short by the report of a rifle mingled with the yell of Indians.

Quickly the party halted to listen. They found they were but a few rods from Trail Canyon, down which clattering hoofs could be heard coming.

"By heavens! some one is being pursued by savages!" exclaimed Doctor Vance, and scarcely had he spoken when a horseman—an old man dressed in the garb of a hunter—whirled from Trail Canyon into the very pass in which they stood! As he did so, the fugitive turned in his saddle and fired upon his pursuers, and then, mingled with the crack of the rifle, came a death-yell and demonic war-whoop that almost froze the blood in the veins of Vance and his party.

Not until after he had fired the shot did the old fugitive discover the doctor's party. The instant he did he uttered a cry of surprise—checked his horse with the evident intention of turning back into the canyon—shouting out:

"My God! friends, for such them ladies tell me ye are, I'll discover you to the Ingins by turnin' in here—I'll try and git back and lead 'em on—"

"Too late, old man! We're discovered—stay

with us!" cried Dauntless Dan, despite the fact he was a prisoner.

"Such impertinence!" sneered Colonel Hermer aside to Lotta Reed, as he drew his revolver.

Quick as thought the old fugitive threw himself from his saddle, turned his horse loose, and running toward the doctor's party cried out:

"Send your women back—quick! There's a score o' the red-rind devils and they'll give us an ugly fight! Ready, men, for they're right here!"

With remarkable presence of mind India ran to where Dauntless Dan stood, severed his bonds, and handing him his carbine, said in hurried tones:

"Prove that you have been wronged, Dan!"

"That I will, India, for your faith is strength to my arm and courage to my heart," responded the youth, and stepping to the side of the old stranger he fired the first shot at the oncoming foe, killing the foremost savage.

A moment later the fight became furious. Laying low upon their ponies the savages discharged their rifles. Jake Nelson fell dead at the first fire, and to elude the enemy's charge the whites quickly sprung back under cover of a fringe of trees and bushes that grew along the base of the bluff.

But on over the dead body of Nelson the redskins charged—plunging into the bushes where the fight was waged with deadly fury. But in the midst of the conflict there suddenly rung out, clear and sharp above the din of battle, the blast of a bugle, and, following the sound from the shadows of the cavern, came a horseman like the wind—a lithe, youthful-looking man, mounted upon a coal-black steed, a bugle in one hand and a revolver in the other, and he followed by half a score of mounted men with drawn sabers.

At the very sound of the bugle the Apaches seemed struck with mortal terror. The victory over the whites which seemed almost gained was snatched away from them, as it were, by the blare of the horn, and they beat a precipitate retreat up the canyon, hotly pursued by the unknown horsemen with flashing sabers and ringing shouts—not one of them halting to inquire after those whom they had rescued.

"Thank God for that providential rescue!" exclaimed Dr. Vance, pale with excitement.

"Plug it to him, boy! plug it to him!" came a voice from the bushes hard by, and hastening to the spot the doctor beheld Dauntless Dan, bruised and bleeding, kneeling upon the breast of an Apache warrior whom he had unhorsed and now slew in a hand-to-hand struggle.

The doctor was almost struck dumb by the sight. In the excitement consequent upon the sudden attack, he had forgotten Dauntless Dan, and now to find him free of his bonds, and to know that he had been risking his life in behalf of those who had but a short time before placed him under arrest for being an outlaw, was, indeed, quite surprising and also reproaching.

"Dan, who released you?" exclaimed Vance, in an excited, yet pleasant tone.

"Your daughter, sir," responded Dan, breathing heavily, for his struggle with the warrior had well-nigh exhausted him.

"Does any one know who those men were that rescued us? Surely they were not soldiers."

"I could not see them from where I was in the bushes," answered Hermer; "but I heard the bugle and their yells as they charged on after the Apaches. Did none of them stop?"

"Not one of them," responded Vance; "they must have been phantom horsemen."

"Nary phant, stranger!" said the old hunter, whose sudden diversion from the canyon had discovered them to the Indians; "they war real live blood-and-flesh rangers and they struck like a whirlwind. They war led by Black Horse Bill, the Outlaw Ranger!"

"Old man, are you sure of that?—was Black Horse Bill with them?" questioned Dr. Vance.

"Right at their head, stranger, on that black hoss, with bugle and pistol in hand, rode the unadulterated Black Hoss William, prairie-terror, cowboy-tormentor and mountain-screamer."

"Sir, this young man here has been under arrest accused of being Black Horse Bill," the doctor confessed.

"And if he is not," added Colonel Hermer, who seemed somewhat ill-at-ease, "then there's more than myself that have been woefully deceived."

Dauntless Dan glanced at the colonel, a faint smile of contempt upon his face, then turned, and without a word walked away to where India and Lotta were standing.

"The boy's a hull mess o' terrors on a fight," declared the old stranger, "a royal lily-lipped hummer, an untamed tempest as sure as my name's Tom Rattler."

"You Tom Rattler, the hunter?" cried Dr. Vance; "I've heard of you, sir, quite often, and am glad to meet you. Your reputation as an Indian-fighter, I can bear witness, has been fully sustained in our recent encounter."

"Thanks, sir; that was a real peart skirmage; but, stranger, I'm sad at heart—in mournin'; the best and bravest friend I ever had is dead. The red hellyons shot him dead back here in the pass, 'bout ten miles."

"I am sorry to hear it, Rattler," replied the doctor, sympathetically; "but we, too, mourn the death of one of our men, brave-hearted Jake Nelson, whose body lies yonder."

"But the world will never know another man like my friend, Bandy," and Rattler wiped a tear from his rugged cheek.

"What! Kit Bandy, the Mountain Detective?" exclaimed Colonel Hermer.

"The same. Then you knew him?"

"I have heard of him. He was a famous old detective."

"Famous? well, I should proclaimate. And as a fighter, he was a Trojan—a cyclone-in-the-forest. As a companion he was the slambangest old trouper that ever spun a yarn—full o' life as a hornets' nest, and yet as kind-hearted and gentle as an infant baby. Poor old Kit! I must go back soon as I can and bury his bones and clip his name on the rock where he fell. It's all I can do for him. But, folks, you shouldn't tarry here too long. Black Hoss Bill and his gang will doubtless be back here soon to gobble up what the Apaches lost. The pretty faces o' them gals will cost you all your lives are worth if the outlaws get sight o' them. You'd better git back into the hills till all danger has passed."

Acting upon the old hunter's good advice, Jake Nelson was hastily buried, Dauntless Dan's wounds dressed by Dr. Vance, and then the party began retracing their steps into the mountains. Rattler remained behind to watch the movements of the outlaws, promising to join the doctor as soon as Black Horse Bill's course could be determined.

Two miles from the canyon on the mountain-side, where water could be obtained and a vigorous defense maintained against odds, the doctor halted until Rattler should join them.

CHAPTER X.

A VERITABLE RESURRECTION.

AN hour later the old hunter came up with the intelligence that Black Horse Bill and seven men came back down the canyon from pursuit of the outlaws, stopped at the scene of the battle, searched the ground over, rifled the bodies of the dead Apaches, then mounted and rode away down the canyon.

"They was a fine-lookin' lot o' young men," the old hunter remarked, "reg'lar young dare-devils. From my hidin'-place I had a good look at their leader. He is a long-haired, beardless chap, and I fancied he looked a heap like that boy, Dan, which may 'count for the mistake you made to-day."

A smile passed over Dan and India's face, but with a frown upon his handsome visage, Colonel Hermer turned away, evidently a much bothered man.

Old Rattler was a valuable acquisition to the doctor's party, and to him all now naturally looked for advice and guidance, he having promised to see them out of their dangers.

After a short consultation the party decided to remain quiet until night, and then under cover of darkness make an effort to escape from the hills.

Colonel Hermer was quite anxious about their situation. He was afraid of danger from the east, and concluded to make a reconnaissance in that direction before nightfall. This Rattler did not think at all necessary; however, the colonel took his departure. As he disappeared from sight Lotta Reed facetiously suggested to India that perhaps her (India's) old lover wanted to be alone in the mountains a while to contemplate the magnitude of his stupid blunder in accusing Dauntless Dan Darcy of being Black Horse Bill.

Much to the surprise of his friends, Hermer did not get back by dark; in fact, he did not get back that night, and the result was the party were detained there, for Dr. Vance would not think of leaving without his friend or some knowledge of his whereabouts. No one thought for a moment that the colonel had deserted them, but all were afraid that he had

met with the danger he had apprehended from the direction of Arcadia Ranch.

So the night was passed there in the mountains waiting and watching, and while partaking of their breakfast of cold bread and meat, Old Rattler expressed the intention of going in search of the colonel; but before their repast was finished, Dauntless Dan, whose eyes and ears were ever on the alert, suddenly enjoined silence upon his friends, at the same time pointing through an opening in the bushes that intervened between them and the outer edge of the broad ledge upon which they were encamped. Every eye quickly turned in the direction indicated and beheld a sight that sent a shudder of fear through every frame. It was an Apache warrior—a lithe, supple fellow, with all the graceful, stealthy movements of a panther. He was creeping along the ledge upon all-fours, evidently reconnoitering. That he was aware of the presence of the whites somewhere in the vicinity was quite evident to Old Rattler, who also felt satisfied he was endeavoring to locate their exact position.

The fugitives could see him quite distinctly, and yet could not be seen, for they were back under a bluff, with rocks and bushes around and over them.

It would have been an easy matter to have shot the red-skin, but Rattler was afraid the report of the gun might endanger their situation, and counseled forbearance and perfect silence until it was absolutely necessary to act.

The Indian was evidently endeavoring to gain the cover of a dense clump of bushes before him and to the left of the fugitives. Gliding noiselessly along like a serpent, he soon came within half an arm's length of the covert and half rose to his feet.

As he did so, the watchers in the shadows were startled by seeing a huge hand and long arm dart out of the bushes, and at the same instant saw the fingers of that hand clutch the savage by the throat in a grip that forced his tongue to protrude from his mouth—saw him thus lifted bodily off his feet and hang in mid-air, writhing like a strangling serpent. But it was only for a moment or two that the savage hung there when the unknown, and still unseen, strangler dragged him into the bushes.

"By the great Rosycrusians!" exclaimed Old Rattler, in an undertone, "that must be Old Strangulation himself thar in that bush-cover!"

They listened and heard three or four heavy, dull blows in the bushes, then all became silent as the grave.

India and Lotta shrunk back, with a feeling of sickening horror half choking them. Dr. Vance looked perplexed. Old Ham, the negro, cowered under the rocks, his teeth fairly chattering. Dan Darcy stood upon one knee, his carbine resting across the other, his eyes fixed upon the bush-covert, while Old Rattler sat plucking at his thin, grizzled beard in a manner that evidenced his unusual perplexity of mind.

"Confound the varmint!" he observed; "if he don't show hisself afore I take the ager, I'll shy an ounce hunk o' lead into that thicket."

Scarcely had he ceased speaking when the bushes parted and a figure appeared therefrom—a figure at sight of which Rattler started up as if confronted by an apparition. It was that of a white man—a tall, angular fellow, well along in years, dressed in the rough garb of a borderman, with the exception of a jaunty little silk hat perched on the back of his head at an angle that gave him the quaint and comical appearance of a genteel vagabond out on a drunken promenade. Stopping, the man looked around him, then started across the ledge.

With a cry of joy Old Rattler plunged through the bushes toward him, shouting:

"Old Kit Bandy alive and well, or may the heavens fall upon me!"

CHAPTER XI.

A WRONGED WIFE ON HER HUSBAND'S TRAIL.

At the sound of Rattler's voice, Kit Bandy—for he the tall stranger was—stopped short and involuntarily grasped his revolver; but at sight of his friend, the old detective's face became radiant with delight, his eyes glowed with a light of joy, and stretching out that long arm, which but a few moments before had been extended from the bush with deadly intent, he seized Rattler's hand in the warm grasp of friendship, exclaiming:

"God bless your pre-historic face, Tom Rattler! 'tis thus we meet once more this side o' the valley o' shadders! I didn't know whether the Paches had peeled that old parchment off yer head or not. I thank the Lord, Tom, that

you're as good and nimble on a retreat as you war in ancient times. Age don't make any difference with you when it comes to scatterin' territory betwixt you and danger, does it, Tom?"

"My heels have saved my life many times, Kitsie," replied Rattler, his wrinkled face beaming with joy, "but you can beat death every time by deception. Ah! Kit, you're Ole Fraud, hisself, but do you know I've been mournin' you as dead?"

"I see crape on yer face, pard, but I s'posed the scarcity of water was the cause o' it," laughed Bandy; "but jokin' aside, I did have a close call—ah! I see you've company."

Dr. Vance and his friends appearing from their concealment at this juncture Old Rattler replied:

"Yes, Kitsie, this is Dr. John Vance, this his darter Ingee, and this his niece, Lotta Reed. There comes Dan Darcy, a young epidemic on a fight."

"Dr. Vance, I'm glad to know you," said Bandy, shaking hands; "and, ladies," lifting his jaunty little "plug" hat and bowing with all the grace of a Chesterfield, "I feel honored to have the pleasure o' your acquaintance, though I know, without the tellin', that we meet here under diffikilties. Mr. Dauntless Daniel, put her there, my boy. Wal, times are lively, ar'n't they, folks? The cussed 'Paches seem to have broke out like a nest o' hornets all through these hills, and if it hadn't been for my friend Rattler's heels my scalp would now be wavin' like a Roman banner from a 'Pache spear-head."

"But how did you escape, Kitsie?—I thought you'd been shot down dead, and was talkin' 'bout goin' back to monument you," observed Rattler.

"Only my hoss was killed," explained Bandy, "and when I fell I was flung ahead twenty rods, more'r less, and had my mental fixin's somewhat mussed up by the fall; but I'd sense enuff left to know that I could not escape 'cept by playin' it fine, and seein' you war retreatin' as usual—in good order—I made up my mind to lay perfectly still, hopin' the Ingins 'd pass on after you and leave me alone till they'd come back, seein' I war down. I knew most o' them, at any rate, would go on, and if only one, or two, or half a dozen stopped to see me I could take care o' them. But, by the horn o' Joshua! the hull pack scooted right by me as if a bird in hand weren't wuth two in the bush. As soon as they were out o' sight I set myself on my feet and looked around. A dead savage laid near, the carcasses o' Vampire Lute and Clinker war a few rods beyond. Goin' over to the Ingin I took his weepens and his plug hat and lit out!"

"Mr. Bandy," said India Vance with a smile, "I recognize that hat as a part of my riding-habit, and it tells me, also, that our home was plundered before it was burned."

"Miss Vance," said Kit, removing the hat, "then I take pleasure in restorin' it to you."

"No, no," quickly responded India, "I will give it to you, seeing you have no hat."

"Thanks, kind miss," and the old detective replaced the hat on his head in a manner that provoked the fugitives into laughter, "but it's not 'zactly in keepin' with the rest o' my trowsers, but I'll wear it for luck. But, folks, you've fallen into good hands, for I tell you Old Tom Rattler is an Old Moses on deliverin' hisself and others outen danger."

"And I should say Kit Bandy had a way of deliverin' red-skins over to death that for stillness is exceptional," said Dr. Vance.

"I did thumb that little varmint's dewlap artistically; but I don't often take that course. The critter's size war suitable for the caper; I didn't want to raise a noise; nor I didn't want to waste a shot, so I jist snuffed him out; but I'll be blest if I knew one o' you war here until Rattler twanged his flute. That Ingin must have been lookin' for you folks, if you've been here any time, for I had jist gained the bushes by climbin' up the cliff beyont 'bout one minute before he found me. But say, folks, that youngster"—referring to Dauntless Dan, who, with his usual precaution, had moved away a few rods and taken a position where he could watch for danger—"is a real tip-top, promisin' lookin' chap. I like to see a feller like him with head up, eyes open, and nostrils dilated like a buck. It's a good sign there's material in him outen which Kit Bandys are made."

"Humph!" ejaculated Rattler, "that's no compliment to the boy, Kitsie, seein' if I war sculptor I could carve a dozen Kit Bandys outen a pine log."

"Well, there is one thing 'g'in' the boy,"

Kit went on, "and that's his handsome face. If he war ugly as Old Tom Rattler he'd git through life much easier."

"Mr. Bandy, I'm sure you do your old friend injustice," said India Vance, disposed to take Rattler's part.

"Oh, no, miss; Tom knows he's ugly as a Mexican 'dobe, and I say he's had years o' sweet life because o' it. He's never been troubled by the ladies—his mortal ugliness has kept them away from him. If I'd been born as plain as he, and as awkward and unshapely, it'd been a blessed thing for me—I'd never known sorry. An unlucky day was it when I, Ka-ristopher Ko-lumbuss Bandy led Ellen Sabina Frisby to the hyeneal altar."

"Then you're a married man," observed India, who with her friends was almost dying with suppressed laughter.

"Married?" exclaimed Kit; "well, I should proclaimate from the mountain-top and twang it throughout the valley. Married? why, that's what's the matter with me—that's why I'm in these hills a fugitive from the mansard roof o' my Corinthian dug-out!"

"Then your married life's not been the pleasantest," said Dr. Vance.

"Doctor, did you ever wrastle with a cyclone?—a grizzly bear?—a horrible nightmare? Do you see this once handsome face scarred and seamed and blurred till it looks like a map o' Old Mexico or an earthquake deestric? Do you see these lines and curves—these parallelograms, and rhomboids, and epicycloids, and trapeziums that would make Old Geometry hisself dizzy? Do you see this ear lops down like a broker bough? Do you see this Wasatch Range beginnin' above this eagle eye and catty-cornerin' across this majestic brow, sweepin' over this temple o' wisdom and plugin' down among patriarchal locks? Wal, all these, and more, are marks of domestic infelicity. Sadirons, pokers, knives and other articles o' kitchen apparel, wielded by the hand o' my wife Sabina did the work. Oh, I tell you, I'm the ruins o' Babylon, the downfall o' the Roman Empire, the destruction o' Herculaneum! But all would 'a' been averted if I'd been as wretched ugly as Rattler here."

"I think your mental faculties have been rattled by marryin', too," declared Rattler.

"Yes, a regular Alexanderian-library deestruction o' wisdom has been the result o' my marryin'."

"And was your wife wholly to blame, Mr. Bandy?" asked Lasso Jim.

"Yes, sir, she was," responded Kit; "only six months ago we met; I forgave her, and for the four hundredth time we concluded to live together—try it, anyhow; so I hired Pat Malloy, an architect who'd been engineerin' a hod up at Denver, to draw up plans and specifications for a fine residence, and then he and I went to work and 'rected one o' the costliest sod-houses in the Chugwater Valley; and then I furnished it up richly and 'Bina and I settled down to business again."

"In just two weeks by the almanac, I heard mutterin' o' a brewin' storm, and twenty-four hours later she had bu'st forth, and as the poic says, the thunder roared and the lightnin' flashed. The Bandy bungalow was a storm-center. Old Sabina let her wrath loose. Every article o' household brick-a-bracks she could git a hold of she hurled at me. I dodged here and there. Our grand piano was smashed the fu'st round. Statoos o' marble was thrown down and pulverized. Costly picters, by the old master artist, Bill Nye, were ruined. The costly Brussels carpet that cost two dollars a robe—winter killed—war torn up by the very roots. The manuscript o' a memorial to Congress on the Mormon question, that I'd been to work on for a week, went into the fire, and when I was finally forced to flee from 'Bina's wrath the only thing in the drawin'-room unhossed was the motto 'God Bless Our Home.'"

"I left her again, determined to die before I'd ever try to live with her ag'in on this earth. I set off up the river in my canoe. The day was awful hot, and when 'bout ten miles from home I pulled into the shade o' the bank and concluded to lay there till evening. Nothin' to do, I laid down and fell asleep. When I woke, by the horn o' Joshua! there sat Sabina on the bank near me, cryin'. Her heart seemed broke. She wanted me to forgive her and go back with her. I swore that I'd die the death o' Gotamozin before I would do any sich fool thing. She confessed that she'd been wuss than Xantippe, and that I had the philosophical patience o' Socrates, but I informed her that was all true, but that I couldn't stand all that old Soc did, nor I wouldn't. She burst forth cryin' ag'in

and wept and wept like a April rain-cloud, and kept on till blamed if the Chugwater didn't begin to rise. There we sot for ten hours, she beggin' and cryin', and at last, man-like, I weakened—surrendered, and we boarded the canoe and set sail for home. 'Bout half a mile 'bove our residence war the Devil's Rapids—a narry way between high rocks through which the water rushed so furiously that no man had ever been known to shoot the rapids and come out alive. Of course, we intended to land above and walk home. I paddled on and when near the rapids and just as I was 'bout to turn the boat shoreward, Sabina said:

"Chris, give me the paddle a moment."

"She said it so purty that I handed her the blade thinkin' that she wanted to paddle us ashore. But no, sir! what should she do but fling that paddle four rods down-stream, and then with a triumphant gleam in her now Dry Tortugas eyes, exclaim:

"Kit Bandy, prove that you love me by savin' me from yander rapids, or we die together!"

"To that I responded heroically:

"If ye want to die, ole woman, die it is, but as fur me I'm not ready to die—the world can't spare me," and then overboard I went and like a walrus struck for shore. 'Bina uttered one o' her favorite screams, but I heeded it not, and just as I crawled out upon the bank I saw the canoe with my wife shoot into Devil's Rapids and then I swooned away.

"As I lay there in the twilight shadows thinkin' o' how my wife died, and that I was a widower, I begun to feel lonely and disconsolate, and onswoonin' I 'rose to my feet and hurried home. The debris o' the mornin' cyclone still lay scattered around. I looked at the motto over the door, then I rummaged the house for my razor that I hadn't seen for twenty years. I found it somewhat the wuss from long disuse, but I stropped it up, took a piece o' the French mirror that'd been broke in the cyclone and shaved myself up, combed my hair, put on a clean shirt, and concluded to go down to neighbor Zach Tooke's and break the news o' Sabina's rash death to Mrs. Tooke, and her widow sister, Abigail Bloom, who was living with her.

"As soon as I entered the door o' the Tooke mansion the Tookes and Mrs. Abigail threw up their hands and screamed. They thought I was a ghost, I looked so pale and wan. With a tremulous voice and studied solemnity I broke to them the news o' my sad bereavement, and a mournful time follered for half an hour. The women wept copiously—especially Mrs. Abigail. The poor woman, I felt sorry for her she took on so. I never see'd any one that could throw such beaucheful sentiment, such refined, quaverin' sobs into her grief as Abbie did. You see she'd had experience. She finally sot about consolin' me. She handled language most beauchefully, and quoted Scripture from the Creation down to the Landin' o' the Pilgrims. Her words strengthened me, and I told her so. She thought a cup o' strong tea added on would help mightily to lighten my burden, and she sot about preparin' it. Tooke and his wife had gone to bed two hours before, and so when Abbie poured me out a cup o' tea, she believed she'd sip a cup with me to steady her narves. We sot up to the table, the widder on one side and me on the same. I was gittin' into a shape to bear my grief with resignation when who should step into that cabin but my wife, Sabina Bandy! She'd shot the Devil's Rapids and come out alive! Mrs. Abigail Bloom uttered a histrionic, female cry and keeled over in a swoon.

"Thank Heaven! Sabina," I cried, "you safely shot the rapids!"

"Yes!" she screamed, seizing a cup of hot tea off the table, "now you shoot that door rapid!"

"I shot, but as I went out at the door the cup of scaldin' tea and the force of her diabolical pun struck me. It was three weeks before I got entirely well. Now, that shows who's to blame. I left the Chugwater that night and hav'n't heard o' Sabina since. But say, folks, what are you tarryin' in these hills for?"

After recovering from the laughter into which Kit's story had provoked him, Doctor Vance replied:

"We are waiting the return of a friend, Colonel Hermer, who left us here last evening promising to return in a short time, but has not yet put in his appearance."

"Colonel Jack Hermer?" repeated Kit.

"Yes; you know him, do you?"

"Wal—no, I can't say that I do, though I'd

like to know the colonel—they say he's a jolly old band—rich, smart and dashin' as a dragoon."

"He is a very fine man—a jovial companion, Mr. Bandy."

"But you can't alers judge a man by his looks," the eccentric old detective went on, "else you'd take my friend Rattler there for an infant Sunday-school 'stead o' a bold buccaneer. But, folkses, I'd like to stay and see you outen your trouble, but I must be movin'. I've an appointment at Red Needle Rock with Captain Pluto, for, as Rattler has doubtless told you, I war playin' for big stakes as an outlaw, and had to unmask to save Old Tom's life. As the other two outlaws to whom I made myself known are dead I can go on as Tom Floater and meet the outlaw chief, a man I never see'd, though been a member o' his gang for months. I'm not in these parts for my health alone, but I'm on a trail, and if I'm not mistaken the trail's gittin' warm. D'ye see that picter?"

The old man handed an old, yet well-preserved tintype of a young and beautiful child—a girl of three or four years—to Doctor Vance, who scanned it closely, and then, by Kit's request, passed it to India.

"Rattler, I hope you'll bring these folks out all safe," Kit said to his friend; "if you were goin' to stay here any length o' time I'd come back and help you."

"Mr. Bandy," said Doctor Vance, "we'll agree to remain here till you do return. I do not like to go away without giving Colonel Hermer more time, for if he has met with no trouble he will certainly return to us here."

"Friends," said Bandy, "just below the mouth of this defile on the side o' Trail Canyon is a nateral little fortress with water runnin' through it. With Old Tom Rattler and the weepens you have you could defend yourselves 'ginst any force likely to attack you in these mountains. I'd advise you to post a notice in a conspicuous place here givin' directions for the colonel to find you in case he should return, and move down there."

To this proposition all readily consented, and in less than two hours the fugitives had taken up quarters in Fort Bandy, as India named the place in honor of the detective.

When Kit was about to take his departure for Red Needle he handed the picture of the child he had shown them before to India, saying:

"Miss India, will you please keep that until I return?"

India promised him she would and he took his departure, Rattler accompanying him a short distance.

Dauntless Dan took a well-selected position on guard, and he had been there less than ten minutes when he heard the sound of hoofed feet coming down the canyon. Parting the bushes that screened him from view he peered through, and to his utter amazement beheld a woman mounted upon a mule riding leisurely toward him. As she approached he hailed her, inquiring:

"Who goes there?"

"Me—a female woman—who are you?" answered the woman, drawing rein.

Dan stepped out where he could see and be seen. He saw that the woman was a little, old lady of perhaps fifty years, dressed in a dark calico dress, an old flaring sun-bonnet, and heavy calf-skin shoes, one of which was plainly visible. Across her lap she carried a big, faded umbrella, and at the horn of her saddle a well-filled carpet-bag.

As Dan emerged from the bushes, he said, in reply to her counter-challenge:

"Madam, I am Dan Darcy. Have you been driven from home by the savages?—are you a fugitive, madam?"

"No, I'm not!" she snapped out, in a clear, falsetto voice; "I'm a pursuer, please the gracious Master—a wronged and deserted wife on the trail of her heartless husband! My name is Sabina Bandy, the lawfully-wedded consort of Old Kit Bandy!"

CHAPTER XII.

THE MYSTERY OF TWO PICTURES.

The sound of Sabina Bandy's shrill voice brought Dauntless Dan's friends to his side.

"This lady says she's Kit Bandy's wife," the boy said, addressing Dr. Vance.

"And I'm his betters, too!" put in the old woman, sharply.

"Madam, your husband left us less than an hour ago," Dr. Vance informed her.

"Merciful man! is that true?" and a light of triumph beamed in her eyes; "then my days of journeyin' and nights of mental anguish will soon be over. Oh! but if I ever lay them hands on him, I'll make him wish he'd never

been born, the heartless wretch. He left my couch and board for no other purpose than to flirt with aspirin' widows and giddy young girls; and, oh, young ladies!"—this to India and Lotta—"I hope you 'lowed that old gallavantin' flirt to make no impression upon your young hearts."

"I assure you, Mrs. Bandy," Lotta answered, not a little amused at the old woman's burning jealousy, "he acted very proper for a man of his age."

"It's the fu'st time, then," Sabina replied, in the tone of one half in doubt, "for I've tracked him from Dan to B'ersheba by the pining, love-sick maidens strung along the way like mile-stones, that the wretched man has 'fatuated with his suave manners, and false gallantry, and then left for other fields."

India and Lotta could restrain their emotions no longer, and burst into laughter, in which they were joined by Lasso Jim and Dauntless Dan. The doctor, despite the gravity of the situation, could not repress a broad smile, and as soon as he could straighten his face, he said:

"You surely run great risks in traversing these mountains, Mrs. Bandy, for there are both Indians and robbers abroad."

"I don't care for them, and grizzly bears throwed in! A woman wronged cares for nothin' but revenge—sweet, dear, darling revenge! I'm no spring lamb any more that the vultures would seek, and if you'll be so kind as to give me the direction my recreant husband went, I will away."

"He and Old Tom Rattler went off down the canyon," answered Vance; "your husband was going to Red Needle Rock to meet Captain Pluto, the outlaw. Rattler was only goin' a short ways with him. You'd better remain here until he returns."

"I'll find Red Needle," said the old woman, "and if I find Bandy there I'll wear out the needle with him and then mop up the ground—yes, I'll do it! A wronged woman is might—you'll hear from me again. Come, git on, Gentle Annie."

The last words were addressed to her mule, which the faithful beast obeyed by ambling off down the canyon on nimble, airy hoofs.

"Well, if that don't beat all the concerns I've struck lately!" observed bluff Lasso Jim.

"I declare!" exclaimed Lotta, indignantly; "I hope she will not find Kit Bandy!"

"Hello!" ejaculated Jim, with arched eyebrows, "has Old Kit left a 'mile-stone' here?"

"No, he hasn't; but then she's an old termagant, while Kit is a brave, shrewd detective. I would not pity her a bit if the Indians'd capture her."

"No, but I'd pity the Indians," declared Dauntless Dan.

"Oh, Dan," suddenly declared India, as a thought occurred to her, "I have something to show you!"

She extracted from its receptacle the tintype Kit had left in her care and handed it to the young plainsman.

At sight of the picture Dan started with unfeigned surprise, quickly feeling in his vest-pocket as if he had suddenly missed something.

"India, where did you get that?"

"The old detective gave it to me to keep for him."

"Is he in search of that child?—the original of the picture?"

"I mistrusted as much. Why, Dan?"

"I have the counterpart of that, though mine is a photograph."

"Indeed?"

Dan produced his picture and compared the two.

"They are, indeed, pictures of the same child!" exclaimed India.

"But what puzzles me is as to how Kit came by that one."

"He made some observation about being upon a warm trail, at the same time producing the picture. This led me to think that the two were closely related—that the 'trail' he was following in some way included the picture."

"Very likely, very likely," mused Dan, as he glanced away across the canyon in a thoughtful manner; "but I do wonder if he could have been put upon that case—that fiendish case?"

"I am sure you speak in riddles, Dan," India said, seeing, with woman's keen perception, that there was some secret mystery about the two pictures that even puzzled her young friend.

Before Dan could reply Old Rattler's voice announced his safe return, and turning, the young couple repaired to where the old hunter stood conversing with the doctor.

CHAPTER XIII.

LIVELY TIMES AT RED NEEDLE.

RED NEEDLE ROCK, where Old Kit had gone to meet Captain Pluto, was about five miles from Fort Bandy, and it required but a short time for the old man to make this distance. As he hove in sight of the Needle, a tall, slender, red-sandstone shaft, he discovered a number of horses hitched hard by, and a number of men sitting and reclining under the boughs of a gnarled hemlock tree. He knew they were all outlaws, for he recognized most of them as men that had been at the Palace of Pluto.

Without the slightest fear he approached them. He knew that his identity was still undiscovered—that the death of Vampire Lute and Clinker in Trail Canyon at the hands of the savages, as well as his adventure there with them and Old Rattler, was still unknown to the marauders.

When about fifty paces from the outlaws, Bandy saw one of the group, with a bandaged head and an arm in a sling, turn and walk away into the bushes; but of this he thought nothing, and strode boldly into camp, where he was received with unusual and noisy enthusiasm.

"Tom Floater, you merry ole ape," said one of his Plutonian friends, who had left the cave a week before, "I'm rejoiced to meet you, and take pleasure in interducin' you to Cap Pluto hisself."

At a glance the old detective saw that the outlaw captain was heavily masked, so that if he had ever seen him before as any other character, he could not have recognized him. His face was covered almost to the very eyes with a full brown beard. His head was covered with a slouched hat pulled down to his eyebrows, while over his other dress he wore a long lined duster buttoned from his throat to his waist.

Kit thought it rather strange that the outlaw should keep himself so thoroughly disguised in the midst of his friends, and it finally occurred to him that he—Bandy—had been suspected by the chief, who wished to keep his identity a secret. But a moment's reflection convinced him this suspicion was without warrant, and as he shook the captain's hand, he said:

"Capt'n, I'm cherubimic glad to meet ye, for t's not often a feller is a follerer for months o' a man that he never see'd."

"Floater," responded the chief, from under his heavy beard, "I have heard of you and your exploits, and your versatility as a storyteller from my messengers. I am glad you came, but are none of the other boys to be here?"

"Vampire and Clinker started with me," the old detective answered, seeing that he must meet the question promptly, and, so far as possible, truthfully, "but I am sorry to say, sir, that a pack o' internal 'Paches ambushed us and slew 'em dead! My hoss was killed, but I escaped by doin' some clear-cut runnin'. It's queer we can't make some terms with them 'Paches same as with the other Ingins."

"An Apache's enmity is better than his friendship," responded Captain Pluto, "for the latter is as dangerous as a detective's cunning and deception. By the way, Floater, I understand Old Kit Bandy, the Mountain Detective, is abroad in the land."

"So they say," replied the old detective, feeling that they were on a delicate subject; "but he don't materialize very fast hereabouts."

"I think he can be materialized," responded Pluto, speaking in a significant tone, and at the same moment Bandy saw the man with the bandaged head coming from the bushes, and at a glance recognized him as Vampire Lute!

A chill crept over the old detective's frame, for he saw that he had been cunningly entrapped.

"How now, Tom Floater, alias Kit Bandy," asked Pluto, pointing with his thumb toward Vampire, "does the old detective materialize now?"

"He doth," coolly responded Bandy, as though he did not care a snap for his detection.

"So-ho, gallant Bandy!" exclaimed Vampire, with a malignant smile, "it's my turn now, you gay old villain! I wasn't as dead as you thought—no deader'n you were. When we see'd you comin' I was appointed a judge and jury to try your case for bein' a treacherous spy, and I retired into the bushes and reached the unanimous verdict that your treacherous old carcass should float to the end of a rope between heaven and earth till you are dead, dead, dead!"

"That's the proper verdict!" shouted half a

dozen voices, and instantly as many revolvers covered the breast of Bandy.

"And a limb of that hemlock will serve as a gallows," said Captain Pluto. "Disarm him, Slugger."

"Slugger" advanced incautiously and was reaching for Bandy's revolver, when "spat" went the old detective's bony fist in his face, and Slugger went to grass with a confused knowledge of something having hit him.

With an oath the outlaw closed in on Kit and soon overpowered and disarmed him. His hands were then tied at his back and a lariat adjusted around his neck.

"Now lead up a horse for a 'dead-fall'—a death-trap," commanded Pluto.

The horse was brought up and Bandy ordered to mount it.

"Not as any one knows of," retorted Kit; "I ar'n't goin' to assist at my own execution."

Two strong men seized the old detective and placed him astride the horse. The animal was then led under the hemlock; a man climbed into the tree and tied the rope, drawing it almost taut, fast to the projecting limb. They were then ready to lead the horse from under the doomed man.

"Now, Mr. Kit Bandy—famous old Mountain Detective," said Pluto, "I must say that yours has been an eventful career. You have given the 'road-workers,' and 'horse-borrowers' and men of our 'fraternity' lots of trouble. You have been the means of hanging many better men than you are, and you deserve to die like a dog. And yet we will extend to you the privilege that is usually given a criminal on the gallows before the black-cap is drawn—that is, the privilege of making any confession you wish—unburden your soul—"

"Bout all I've got to say is that I'd like to 'a' see'd you all hung, as you will be some day, before I died. Mind what I tell you. Captain Pluto, you'll feel the halter 'round your neck before ever you— But, I've no more to say."

"Oh, say it! say it!" exclaimed Pluto, betraying a little anxiety; "you needn't be afraid hurting my feelings—"

"Hark!" suddenly exclaimed an outlaw, "some one's comin'—a horseman—no, by St. Judas! it's a woman!"

True enough, a woman mounted upon a mule rode into the opening around Red Needle. It was Sabina Bandy, and at sight of the spectacle before her she drew rein her face blanched with horror.

"Great Jezabel!" cried Captain Pluto, gazing at the woman in astonishment, "who, or what's that?"

The woman began clutching at her throat as if for breath, and presently there issued from her lips like a sudden explosion, a hysterical shriek that started the echoes around.

"Woman!" exclaimed Pluto, advancing a step or two toward her, "who are you? what are you doing here?"

"Ah!" exclaimed Old Kit, glancing around at the woman, "it is my wife, Sabina."

"My heavens!" shrieked the woman, "that is my husband! do you mean to hang him?—widow me?"

"That is our intention, madam," responded Pluto.

"Who ever s'posed Tom Floater was a married man?" put in Vampire; "that Kit Bandy had a wife?"

"It's true, good gentlemen," Sabina half-wailed; "years ago he won my girlish heart, and though he has been ungrateful to me at times, I love him still as no female wife ever loved. God only knows how much I've suffered in searchin' for him these months and months, and now you surely will not tear him from me in the moment of success. Spare him to me, and I will flee with him to the remotest land."

"Madam, I'm sorry you came so soon," said Pluto, "for it would have been better for you to have had your old man dead, as dead he will be in a few minutes; so if you'll depart while you're being made a widow, you'll be spared the sight of the execution."

"Oh, woe! woe! is me!" Sabina wailed out, wringing her hands in great distress; "but before I go, grant me one request—that I may give my husband a farewell embrace—do, I beg of you, grant me this one little favor!"

"Certainly, madam, certainly," responded the chief.

A grim, heartless smile passed over the faces of the outlaws as Sabina rode alongside her husband and, slightly leaning over, threw her arms about Kit's neck and wailed out mournfully:

"Oh, Christopher! Christopher! this is awful to part thus forev—er! And how much better

if I could die instead o' you! Still happy we'd be in our home on the Chugwater if it had not been for your—confounded meanness!"

Here her lamentations ended, for her grief seemed to have suddenly changed to anger and violence. By some means, unseen or unknown to the outlaws, the rope around Kit's neck had been severed and with the quickness of a flash—as if to give emphasis to her last words—Sabina jerked her husband from the outlaw's horse across her lap, face downward, and as she did so her mule shot away like an arrow, the head and heels of Bandy flopping in the air as the old man lay helpless across his wife's lap.

Oaths burst from the lips of the outlaws as they sprung in a body after the flying mule. One swift fellow succeeded in getting the mule by the tail, and was snatched through the low bushes at a frightful speed. His friends yelled to him to hold on to the mule, but all at once they saw the old woman throw an arm behind—saw a little cloud of smoke burst from her hand, heard the report of a pistol and saw their friend drop to the earth.

Running to their fallen comrade the freebooters found he was dead with a little, round bullet-hole in the center of his forehead.

"Tricked, by the gods!" cried Captain Pluto, "and by an old woman! Men, mount and pursue! Shoot mule, man and woman on sight! Lively, men, lively! Pursue them to Hades!"

Every man, including Pluto, except the wounded Vampire, flew to his horse, mounted and dashed off in pursuit of the fugitives, who by this time were out of sight behind the wooded bluffs.

Cursing with impotent rage Vampire seated himself on a rock and rested his aching head upon the palm of his right hand. The sound of the horses' hoofs died away in the distance, and all became silent around Red Needle where but a few moments before all was so lively.

Despite his mental and physical anguish Vampire began to meditate upon the uncertainties of the things of this life. While thus engaged the figure of a man crept from the shadows to the side of the dead outlaw, whose weapons he appropriated, and then stole noiselessly toward the meditating Vampire with cocked revolver.

The outlaw's usually acute hearing was deadened by the throbbing pain of his wounded head, and not until the shadow of the skulker fell across his vision did he know of his presence. Looking up he was horrified to find himself confronted by the inimical Old Kit Bandy with a drawn revolver.

"Avaunt, Vampire, or, by the horn o' Joshua, I'll bore a Hoosac tunnel plumb through you!" was the old detective's salutation. "Thanks to my wife, I still live and flourish and expect to see you and Captain Pluto hung—don't attempt to draw that pop, Vam., or you'll die a premature death. I'm not to be trifled with now, nor do I want to kill you, seein' you've been havin' hard luck o' late. But I'll take no risks. I want you to give Captain Pluto my compliments when he comes back and tell him I'll see him later— Oh, no, Vampire!"

This last remark was occasioned by Vampire attempting to draw his revolver, and to thwart his designs Bandy sent a bullet through the desperate villain's hand causing him to drop the weapon and shriek with agony.

Taking up the revolver Kit placed it in his own belt. Not far away the outlaws had left four other revolvers and two rifles lying on the rocks. The revolvers Kit secured in his belt and pockets and the rifles he broke over a rock. The dead outlaw's horse stood near. Turning the animal loose he cut up the bridle and saddle, and then going back to the writhing Vampire, said:

"As there's nothin' more 'round here, Vampire, for me to demolish unless I kick Red Needle over, I'll depart. Don't forget my comps. to Cap. Pluto, and tell him I slid out o' Sabina's lap not over forty rods from here and returned to have some fun. Remind him that there's many a slip between the adjusted hangman's noose and death. Tell him all, and more, too, and mebbe I'll be hid near where I can see him dance a heel-and-toe polka. Ajew, Vampire, ajew!"

And, turning, Kit Bandy disappeared from the opening, Vampire watching the course he took, a consuming fire of rage and vengeance burning with a fierce, white heat in his breast.

CHAPTER XIV.

THE ATTACK ON FORT BANDY.

WITH eager impatience Dr. Vance and his party awaited the return of Kit Bandy from

Red Needle Rock. Since his wife had come and gone, they felt that they had been guilty of a great blunder in not keeping her there until he should return, for they were afraid that she might be the means of getting him into trouble should she come across him while with the outlaws. When Old Rattler came back, however, he laughed at their expressions of fear and regret, though keeping a secret the true character of Sabina Bandy.

As to Colonel Hermer, all hopes of ever seeing him alive again had almost died out of Dr. Vance's breast.

Some hours went by when the silence was finally broken by the distant report of a rifle. The sound came from back in the hills to the eastward, and taking up his rifle Old Rattler left the fort with the intention of making a reconnaissance in that direction.

In half an hour he returned and, to the joy and surprise of Dr. Vance, he was accompanied by Colonel Jack Hermer; but the doctor and his friends had to look the second time at the colonel before they would believe it was he, for, coatless and hatless, his clothing torn, his face covered with sweat and dirt, and his hair in disordered masses, he presented the appearance of a hunted, terrified fugitive.

After the colonel had washed his hands and face and set things to rights the best he could, he informed his friends that he had been hunted and hounded ever since he had left them—hiding here and there like a cony—creeping and crawling through bush and bramble like a wounded wolf until it seemed he must die of exhaustion, if not at the hands of his pursuers. Both Apaches and outlaws had hunted him between the times they were not hunting each other, and but for this enmity that existed between them, he would never have escaped.

After the colonel had eaten a few bites of cold meats and bread, he and the doctor sat down by themselves to discuss the situation. To the colonel it was anything but promising. The hills were full of enemies.

"Were the girls safe," he said, "we men could rough it through, and get back to Arcadia Valley, and from there shape our course to the nearest point of safety. The hell-hounds of Black Horse Bill are determined that you shall not escape from here if they can prevent it."

"Well," said the doctor, "our friend, Dauntless Dan, has proven himself anything but the outlaw we took him to be."

"But for all that, doctor, there is something in his eyes and face that I do not like—something suggestive of a sleeping devil in his breast. Moreover, he is infatuated with your daughter, India, and for that reason may be playing a desperate game if he is a young man—a boy."

"And, colonel, I am afraid my daughter is infatuated with the boy," the doctor said, regretfully; "I discovered the moment Dan arrived at my ranch that they knew each other. When and where they became acquainted I know not. But there is one thing certain: Dan is not Black Horse Bill, for you know the outlaw was seen at the head of his men—yea, rescued us from the Apaches—while Dan was fighting like a hero at our sides."

"Again, for all that, doctor," persisted the colonel, "the fact that he loves India, and that he fought with us is natural enough since the outlaws and Apaches are enemies. But even if he is not Black Horse Bill, it is not at all strange that I should make the mistake I did since the glimpse we got of the outlaw ranger showed a strong resemblance to Dauntless Dan."

"I'll admit," said Vance, "that the whole thing is somewhat mixed up—rather clouded. Black Horses helping us whip the Apaches, and driving them away, and not coming back to inquire into the result of the battle strikes me as the strangest thing of all."

"I think he pursued the savages for plunder—their horses and arms of which they generally have the best. Could they have made more by stopping on the scene of battle and killing and robbing us they would have done so. I do not think they saw India or Lotta at all, else we, doctor, would not be here."

"When Bandy gets back—"

"Who? Kit Bandy, the Mountain Detective?" exclaimed Hermer.

"The very same; he's been here since you left. He informs us that Captain Pluto's rendezvous was not far from here, and thinks much of our trouble is due to him instead of Black Horse Bill and the Apaches. He has been in Pluto's cave—a member of the gang, and is now at Red Needle Rock to meet the outlaw chief who, it seems, does not stay at the cave much of his time."

"Then very likely Black Horse Bill is Cap-

tain Pluto, for it has been said that his headquarters are in the saddle."

"Well, we'll know when Bandy gets back; I tell you, he's a whole team, colonel, a very eccentric and remarkable man."

"I've heard he was; I have never met him."

"We're looking for him—Ah! there he comes now."

True enough, the old detective was coming up the canyon but a short distance away. Dauntless Dan was the first to greet him. The girls clapped their hands with joy at sight of him, while Old Tom Rattler shouted:

"Hail, Kitsie, prince o' detectives, and king o' frauds, and successor to Ananias—ruins o' Bab'lon and child o' lamentations. Welcome back, Tom Floater."

"Thanks, Tom, for your generous greetin'," responded Bandy, drawing his sleeve across his hot, perspiring brow.

"Mr. Bandy, did you see your wife?" eagerly questioned India.

"Yes, ma'am, we met and we parted. The outlaws got onto my 'Tom Floater' game and proceeded to hang me, and while I stood, as it were, on the gallows, up lopes Old Sabina on her Gentle Annie mule, begs for a last embrace, and, while doin' the affectionate, she cut the rope, yanked me across her lap, and—*presto!* we war gone like a ray o' sunlight! In the woods she dropped me and sailed on, but she'll turn up, I warrant, some time. 'Bina's no spring fawn, gals, and you couldn't snuff her out any more than art and cosmetics could make a handsome man o' Tom Rattler, or a ship-load o' missionaries could convert him unto righteousness."

"Mr. Bandy," said Dr. Vance, approaching with Hermer, "I welcome your return, and take pleasure in introducing you to my friend, Colonel Hermer, of whom I was telling you today. He has just got back from his reconnaissance, fully satisfied that there are dangers to the east of us."

"Glad to cross palms with you, colonel," said Bandy, in his free-and-easy way, "and hope we'll git better acquainted before we part."

"Thanks, Mr. Bandy," replied the colonel, speaking with some difficulty; "but times are unpleasantly lively around here just at present."

"They be, by the horn o' Joshua. Thar's haydoogins o' outlaws and Ingins in these hills. It seems that Pluto's gang o' cut-throats, Black Hoss Bill's band o' mounted freebooters, old Geronimo's red marauders, and the devil's imps, are all dumped in here in a general round-up."

"Do you think, Kit, those you name are all working together?" queried Dr. Vance.

"So far as our sculps are concerned they be, sure as Satan has a monopoly on Old Tom Rattler."

"With our scalps taken, what then?" asked Hermer.

"Then the Ingins and outlaws'd fight 'mong themselves, I presume. The 'Paches have no love for a white-skin, and the outlaws would as soon rob an Apache as a ranchman. They're friends 'bout like the prairie-dog and rattlesnake—combine against their natural enemy—kill each other for personal benefit. But, folks, I feel choky yet, I come so dashed nigh being hung by Pluto's devils."

"Mebbe it's a solitary truth that death's presence skeered up outen some disused corner o' your breast that's stickin' in yer thrattle, Kitsie," suggested Rattler.

"It may be, Tom, but it's a danger that'll never harm you, for—"

Bandy dodged, as a bullet cut past his ears with a "swish" and struck the rock behind him, and at the same instant the crack of a rifle rung across the canyon. A little puff of smoke hanging on the opposite side of the pass told whence the shot had come, and quickly the party sought shelter behind the rocks.

Both Rattler and Dauntless Dan, rifles in hand, gave their best attention to the secreted foe.

"Lad," said the old hunter, "that varlet's 'bout three hundred yards away, and the time's been when that war jist my distance for a daisy-shot, but these old eyes don't reach out like they did. Howsumever, I can see the varmint's head bobbin' 'bout 'bove a rock, and be he red-rind or white, it's a chance for a crack shot."

"I think it's an Ingin, Rattler."

"No difference, lad, try it a welt. I've see'd you on a fight, now let me see how you can fling lead at a red-rind."

Dan rested his rifle on a rock and taking a

careful aim, fired. Rattler watched the effect of the shot and saw a puff of dust on the hillside just back of the red-skin's head.

"A little high, lad, a little high, though I'm thinkin' it went powerful clus to the varlet's—By the Rosycrusians! lad, you fetched him! I see him kickin' and flounderin' out from ahind the rock—Look sharp, lad!—lay low!"

The last words of caution were induced by seeing a dozen or more clouds of smoke burst from the opposite side of the canyon, and as the two ducked their heads, as many bullets struck the rocks behind them, warning them that they had dodged none too soon.

"Clus call, lad," said Old Rattler, as the report of the enemies' guns crashed through the hills.

Before Dan could reply an Apache war-whoop, which for fiendishness could be imitated by no other Indian, followed the report of their rifles. This was in turn followed by a yell from down the canyon, and then from the hillside like fiends came a dozen savages; and from down the pass a score of outlaws—not to meet each other in deadly conflict, but join their forces in an onslaught upon the little band of whites!

"Look out, friends! they're comin'!" shouted Dauntless Dan, leveling his rifle upon the foremost savage.

"Here, Bandy!" called Old Rattler, "this way, pard; an old-timer's comin'—ten apiece for the Epidemic and the untamed Tempest!"

"I'm here, Thomas," and with rifle in hand Bandy advanced to the side of the old hunter.

"Colonel," said Dr. Vance to Hermer, "if I fall and you live and see the foe are to win, do not let India and Lotta fall into their hands alive!"

With this request, made in the hearing of the girls, the doctor turned, and with carbine in hand advanced to join his friends in battle.

CHAPTER XV.

A DESPERATE CONFLICT.

FORT BANDY, as before stated, was a natural defense—a V-shaped cleft in a perpendicular hillside, the point extending into the hill and terminating in the darkness of a cavern, or, more properly, a large fissure in the rocks. In front of this cleft was a broad ledge, or platform of rock, extending out thirty feet, then dipping down gradually thirty or forty feet to the level of the canyon. This platform was flanked on either side by a wall of rock whose outward formations made it impassable. In front, the only point from whence an enemy could approach, a stone wall had evidently been laid up by the hand of man at some time in the remote past. This wall had been repaired by Dr. Vance and his friends, and behind this they stood to repel the outlaws and savages.

Evidently the enemy was ignorant of the advantages the place afforded as a defense, and this, taken in connection with the fighting qualities of the defenders, and the dexterity with which they handled their repeaters, proved a bloody surprise to the assailants. From the moment that Dauntless Dan fired the first shot, a constant stream of death poured from behind that wall into the enemy's ranks.

Being compelled to approach the fort in plain view of the defenders, the Indians were unable to withstand an open-field charge, and broke ranks and sought the shelter of rocks and bushes where they could do no harm to the whites.

As the red-skins had led the attack their sudden retreat proved a great disappointment to the outlaws. But the latter never faltered, and with a bravery worthy of a better cause, they rushed up the inclined approach to the wall with a yell like that of demons. The savages, supposing they had carried the fort, and wishing to be in at the massacre, rallied from the bushes and with a war-whoop returned to the attack. But they soon found out their mistake. The outlaws reached the wall and endeavored to scale it. One man did succeed in getting on top, but was shot by Bandy, his body falling inside the fort.

With a revolver in each hand, shooting first right and then left, Bandy, Rattler, Dauntless and Lasso Jim handled their weapons with such marvelous skill and rapidity that not a single outlaw got over the wall alive. With a cry of dismay the Indians for the second time beat a precipitous retreat, and their flight threw the outlaws into a panic and they, too, turned and fled, leaving over half of their number slain.

But the victory of the defenders was not without its casualties, though not a man had been killed. Bandy had received several pain-

ful bruises by stones hurled over the wall by the assailants, and one of the very last thrown struck Dauntless Dan on the head, cutting an ugly gash in the scalp and knocking him down half-unconscious.

Dr. Vance saw the gallant boy go down and hastened to his assistance, and when he found he had not been killed, he proceeded to dress his wound as well as his means would admit. While thus engaged, Old Rattler, who had been back in the cave, came hurrying up, asking:

"Doctor, wher'n earth's the colonel? and gals? and the nigger? They're not in the cave nor can I find em!"

The doctor started. In the excitement of the conflict he had forgotten the colonel and the girls. He did not remember seeing or noticing them since he spoke to Hermer at the beginning of the fight, for from that time but one thought had been in his mind and that was of defeating the enemies. Naturally enough he never thought otherwise than that the colonel would give his help in the conflict.

"By the horn o' Joshua!" exclaimed Kit Bandy; "I'm afeard a great blunder has been committed!"

"In what way, Bandy?"

"In 'lowin' the enemy to slip in at the rear and steal the gals while we were fighting at the front."

"My God! that surely cannot be possible!"

"I'll see," declared Dauntless Dan, who, despite his injuries, hurried back into the shadows of the cave to look for the absent four.

He was gone but a few minutes when he came hurrying back, his face flushed with excitement.

"They are gone!" he gasped, "escaped through a great, dark crack in the rocks which leads from the cave up and back among the hills!"

"Then, by heavens!" cried Old Kit, "our work's just begun, for by this time the girls are in the power of the outlaws."

"Impossible, Bandy! impossible!" cried the doctor; "why do you make such positive assertions?"

"Because, doctor," answered Kit, "I believe Colonel Hermer is a monumental villain—Captain Pluto, himself!"

CHAPTER XVI.

ON THE TRAIL—A STARTLING DISCOVERY.

KIT BANDY'S declaration fell like a thunder-bolt upon the ears of Dr. Vance. The look he gave the old detective was one of mingled surprise and doubt; but he readily saw that Bandy was in dead earnest.

Dauntless Dan was the first to break the momentary silence that had fallen like a paralysis upon the party.

"I'm pretty sure," he said, "that there is somethin' wrong 'bout Colonel Hermer."

"That is what he said of you, Dan," replied the doctor, distressed in mind, his spirit mortified, and his confidence in mankind shaken.

To the doctor's reply in which a more sensitive nature might have detected a tinge of sarcasm, Dauntless Dan made no answer, but taking up his rifle, said:

"No amount of argument or talk will rescue India and Lotta. It's work that's wanted now—downright hard and careful work. If Colonel Hermer is a villain, and has been the instrument of the girls' capture, we can soon ascertain the facts. Your wife, Kit, may also be in the power of the outlaws or Indians by this time."

"That's downright Book-o'-Revelation truth," declared Rattler; "and one minute now will be wuth more than an hour to-morrow this time."

Preparations for departure were soon made, and then Dauntless Dan took the lead and conducted the party through the dark and narrow "fissure" that gradually tended upward through the rocky hills, until it brought them out into the full light of day on the mountain-side. Here they struck a goat-path along which they could easily see, by the recently-displaced pebbles and twigs, that the fugitives had passed. This they followed for half a mile when they came to where it forked, one branch leading toward the southeast, the other toward the southwest—a great mountain-range rising up between the two and trending off toward the south. Here the pursuers met with their first difficulty. They found that both branches of the trail had been recently traversed.

"By the horn o' Joshua," declared Old Kit, "we must find out which way the gals were taken, and not let the colonel outwit the hull brigade o' us. Rattler, you're an old trailer; s'pose you exhibit a specimen o' your skill?"

Rattler, assisted by Dauntless Dan, began a

close examination of the two paths. About ten rods from the forks the old hunter found a ribbon on the left that was recognized by the doctor as having belonged to Lotta.

"That settles it, I suppose," said Lasso Jim.

"Settles what?" asked Dan.

"That the girls have been taken that way."

"In my opinion," said the young Free-Lance, "it proves the opposite—that the girls have been taken away by the other, or *right trail*! That ribbon wasn't dropped there by accident, but placed there by design to deceive us."

"The boy's a philosopher on the trail and the tricks of a villain," declared Old Kit.

"My friends," said Dr. Vance, "I still cannot think that Colonel Hermer is the man you mistrust him to be."

"Doctor," responded Bandy, "I know it's hard to shake one's faith in one he has so long regarded as a friend by mere suspicions; but if Dauntless Dan's theory as to the ribbon proves correct, it will certainly be conclusive evidence that the object was to mislead pursuin' friends."

"Not exactly conclusive, Mr. Bandy. Who knows but that the ribbon was placed there to guide following friends? or, if to deceive, perhaps Colonel Hermer may himself be a captive as well as the girls. But, friends, do not let one word from me divert you from what you honestly believe. You are mountaineers, and versed in the ways of its good and bad characters; and since Mr. Bandy and Dan speak so positive of Hermer's character, I am inclined to think they base their suspicion on grounds unknown to me, and, therefore, I shall not question the right or wrong of that suspicion until the matter has been fully settled."

Without further delay the pursuers decided to take the right trail and moved off in Indian file, Dauntless Dan still in the lead.

Half a mile from the forks the lad suddenly came to a halt and pointed to a pool of fresh blood in the path, saying:

"What does that mean?"

Bandy shook his head, replying:

"It looks suspicious, lad; somethin', or somebody has been murdered on that very spot!"

"Ay!" exclaimed Old Rattler, after searching the ground closely, "and here's a trail o' trickled blood leadin' off from the path."

The old hunter followed it into a clump of bushes and there found the body of Old Ham, the negro servant, shot through the head!

This horrifying discovery fell with crushing force upon the spirit of Dr. Vance, and for some moments he was bowed down with grief as he gazed upon the lifeless form of the old servant.

"This settles the fact of our being on the right trail," said Bandy.

"And o' the gals bein' in the hands o' enemies—the same as killed the poor old nig to git rid o' him," added Rattler.

"But why was he brought here, friends?—why taken away from the fort at all?" questioned the doctor.

"Durin' the fight," replied Old Kit, "I think Hermer, knowing o' the outlet from the cave, took advantage o' the gals' and Old Ham's fears and, under pretense o' friendship, induced them to leave with him, makin' them believe that to remain would be death—takin' the darky simply to conceal these facts, and then slew him when they got him here to git rid o' him. I say 'they,' for I believe other outlaws had jined Hermer before ever this murder was done."

Old Ham's body was covered with stones, for no other burial could be given it there on the rocky mountain-side, and the pursuit was continued.

They had traveled perhaps three miles further when all were startled by a peculiar whistle.

"Look out! to cover!" shouted Old Rattler, and quick as possible every man except Dauntless Dan sought the shelter of a rock.

Dauntless Dan, however, stood his ground, and placing his fingers to his lips answered the whistle in a similar manner, much to the surprise of his friends, who immediately thereafter saw the form of a stranger emerge from cover of some bushes and come toward them.

He was a young man of perhaps five-and-twenty years, dressed in the neat and fanciful suit of a ranchero. He was a little above medium hight with the fine physique of perfect manhood. His features were clear-cut, expressive and withal decidedly handsome. He had a keen yet pleasant dark-brown eye, a heavy dark mustache, and long, dark hair. He was armed with a carbine that was slung at his back and a pair of handsomely-ornamented revolvers that hung at his hips.

He advanced with a quick step, and empty-

handed, toward Dauntless Dan upon whose face shone a light of recognition; and when they met they grasped hands, Dan saying:

"Old friend, I am glad to meet you."

"And I you," replied the handsome stranger, "and I am glad to know you are not alone."

"Not alone, but our whistling sent them to bush; but here they come, and turning to his friends he said: 'Folks, this gent is a chum o' mine, Donald Fairfax, and I can vouch for his being one of the truest and most fearless of ranchoeros.'"

The handsome young ranchero advanced and, as Dan named each of the party, shook hands with him.

"Donald," said Old Kit, with his usual familiarity, "I like to press the palm o' an honest lad; but your presence here with 'em spurs on yer heels tells me you've been unhossed."

"Not forcibly," responded Fairfax; "I left my horse a mile or two from here to follow this trail back to—"

"Ah! then you met no one on the way?" exclaimed Vance.

"I met no one, yet I saw Colonel Jack Hermer and two ladies—"

"Alone?"

"They were in custody of four outlaws."

"My God! then Dan was right!" groaned the doctor.

"Was Hermer a prisoner?" asked Old Rattler.

"His hands were tied in front of him," replied Fairfax.

"And where did they go?" questioned Vance.

"They left this trail, descended the hillside to the valley, and there, mounting horses in waiting, rode away toward Trail Canyon. Feeling certain that friends of the ladies were back this way I started in search of them, though I was not sure I would find them alive."

"Men," said Dr. Vance, "I feel relieved as to the colonel's guilt, for his being a fettered prisoner is evidence that he is not the villain that we have mistrusted him of being. But what shall be done?"

"They may make for the Palace of Pluto with the captives," said Bandy, "and once in that hole the hull United States can't dislodge 'em till they starve 'em out. But by lively work we might head 'em off, and as I'm familiar with the cavern and its approaches, I reckon I'm the feller to lead out for there. But it won't do for us all to go there for maybe the outlaws will go somewhere else, and 'less a watch is kept on them they might give us the slip while we war all 'round watchin' the cave."

"My friend, Don, and I, will follow up the outlaws if the rest of you will go and watch the cave," said Dauntless Dan. "If the villains go to the cavern we will meet you along the river at the lower end of the Black Gorge. If they do not go to the cave you may not see us again for a month, for we'll follow them to Old Mexico but what we rescue them girls dead or alive."

"Go, boys, and may God speed you," was the prayer of Dr. Vance.

Dauntless Dan and Don Fairfax hastily departed, and while Bandy and his friends stood watching them, Old Rattler said:

"That Dauntless Dan's a holy stunner—a lily-lipped hummer, and that pard o' his is a match for him. They're a precious pair, friends."

"Folks," exclaimed Old Kit, stretching out his arm and pointing his long finger in the direction the two had gone, "that Dan boy is a deep one, for I'll bet a coonskin 'g'inst Tom Rattler's scalp that he is the identical, original Black Horse Bill hisself after all."

CHAPTER XVII.

DAUNTLESS DAN IN THE SADDLE.

AGAIN were Bandy's friends startled by the astounding wager he offered to make in relation to Dauntless Dan.

"Kitsie," Old Rattler declared, "you're gittin' crankier than a flyin'-machine maker. You seem to take great delight in lungin' somethin' startlin' into our ears. I'd like to know what reason you've got, at this late hour, to 'cuse that boy o' bein' Black Hoss Bill?"

"If true," put in Doctor Vance, "then it is no more than Colonel Hermer charged him with."

"Hermer may know more 'bout the boy than I think he does," said Old Kit; "but as sure as Dan's Black Horse Bill, so sure is it that the colonel is Captain Pluto."

"Then why should they be enemies—arrayed against each other?" queried the doctor.

"They're rival outlaws!" answered Kit.

"Than God help my girls! they will be no safer in the hands of one than the other!"

"I think diff'rent, doctor," replied Kit, "for you must remember that while the boy was lightin' like a Trojan to save you and your gals, the colonel was stealin' them away."

"But what does that all signify if he is Black Horse Bill?"

"He may be the Outlaw Ranger and yet defend innocence."

"By the great Rosycrusians!" declared Old Rattler, "it's gittin' to be a wuss mixed-up affair than Kit Bandy's noddle; but Black Hoss or not, that boy's a hero. He'll harm the hair o' no gal's head. But don't forgit, folks, that while you had Dan in bonds—while the 'Paches war arter yer ha'r—who should dash up and rout the Ingins but Black Hoss Will'm and his gang? Now, how you goin' to figger that out, Kitsie? Can a man be in sight and two distinct bein's at the same time? Is Black Hoss Bill a pair o' twins? Say, Kitsie, resolve these questions in your monumental brain and give us a supreme-court decision."

"Rattler," answered Kit, evasively, "a wise man axes but one question to a time, and only a bald-headed gump'll undertake to answer more. Let's be movin', folks; I want to stay with Colonel Hermer and Black Horse till this thing's done with."

So saying, the old detective led off, followed by his friends, shaping his course in the direction of Pluto's Palace.

It was a long and difficult journey, but late in the evening they arrived at a point where they could, by dividing their forces, watch the two approaches to the cavern.

Kit Bandy and the doctor watched below, and Rattler and Lasso Jim above the "palace." During the night the two former saw two outlaws, with four wounded comrades, making for the cave, but they permitted them to pass on, though every man could have been slain.

All night an unbroken watch was kept, but no more outlaws were seen, and shortly after daylight Kit and the doctor left their watch and joined their two friends, when, after a short consultation, they concluded to proceed southward at once, satisfied now that the maidens had been taken away in some other direction.

Ten miles from the outlaws' retreat found them picking their way along a goat-path on a narrow ledge overhanging a deep, wooded valley, and while thus proceeding Bandy caught sight of a thin wreath of smoke curling up from among the trees in the valley about a mile before them.

"There must be a camp-fire there," the old detective observed.

"Then we'd better lower ourselves from here or we may git basted to this hillside with Ingin or outlaw lead," said Rattler.

Acting upon this suggestion, they descended into the valley and then began moving cautiously forward to ascertain the source of the smoke they had seen. This they soon found to be a camp-fire, true enough, and near it was a group of half a dozen men, and back of these as many caparisoned horses hitched to trees. Among the animals was a coal black steed, the sight of which caused Bandy to exclaim:

"Outlaw Rangers, by the horn o' Joshua! and if I mistake not I see a familiar form or two among the gentlemen!"

Keeping well under cover, they moved on. Within the shadows of a clump of bushes not over forty paces from the camp they secreted themselves and took a careful survey of the party.

"By the great Rosycrusians!" exclaimed Old Rattler, in an excited whisper, driving his elbow into Kit's ribs with such force as to almost cause him to groan aloud, "if there isn't our friend Dauntless Dan among them, and the biggest duck in the puddle."

"Yes, and there is his friend, Donald Fairfax," added Dr. Vance. "Dan is, or seems to be, giving orders. Bandy was right. Dauntless Dan is Black Horse Bill. Colonel Hermer is an innocent man."

"They're preparin' to depart," said Old Kit.

True enough. Dauntless Dan finally walked to where the black horse stood, unhitched it and vaulted into the saddle. As he placed his feet in the stirrups, and settled himself in his seat, the watchers heard him exclaim:

"Boys, I'm at home now, and feel like myself. Mount, and let's be off."

Quickly every man sprung into his saddle, and as they dashed away Dr. Vance raised his rifle, his eyes flashing with a vengeful fire as he exclaimed:

"I will shoot that treacherous young devil!"

But before he could level the piece the ranger outlaws swept from his view, and lowering the weapon he stood pale and speechless, gazing in the direction the horsemen had gone.

A deep silence followed. Finally Bandy said: "Confound it, Old Tom Rattler, why don't you say somethin', man, and not stand there like a deaf-and-dumb asylum?"

"Better that than a rattle-tongued lunatic shop," rejoined the old hunter.

But the fact of it was the four men were completely dumfounded. For once Kit Bandy was unable to act with his usual expediency, and not until the horsemen were gone beyond recalling did he seem to fully realize his blunder. But making the best of it by blaming all on Old Rattler, he finally concluded to keep on southward in hopes of yet obtaining some trace of the maidens.

At a rapid pace they started on, following the trail of the Outlaw Rangers.

Not over two miles had been thus traversed when they were brought to a stand by the sound of horses' feet, and a moment later four persons rode into view from around the spur of a hill and directly toward them. At sight of them Bandy started back, exclaiming:

"Horn o' Joshua! my wife, Sabina!"

"Yes, and Dauntless Dan, the young outlaw!" Dr. Vance fairly hissed, a vengeful gleam burning in his eyes.

True enough, on a black horse at Sabina's side rode Dauntless Dan as the pursuers believed, though, since they had seen him an hour or two before, he had changed his mountaineer garb for that of a neat-fitting suit of a ranchero.

"Kitsie, they've taken your Sabina a captive!" whispered Rattler.

"Curse him!" exclaimed Vance, cocking his rifle and stepping into view of the horsemen; "he shall not escape us this time—halt, there! villains, throw up your hands!"

Quickly the four drew rein. Old Sabina uttered a hysterical shriek and dropped from her mule. The outlaws seemed reluctant to obey Vance's command, but when Bandy, Rattler, and Lasso came into sight they dropped their reins and raised their hands in a hurry.

"At last! at last!" shrieked Sabina at sight of Old Kit, "I have found ag'in my recreant husband—my heartless partner!"

She rushed toward her lord as if expecting to be received with open arms, but ruthlessly brushing her aside Kit said crustily:

"Git away and don't bother me! don't ye see, you ole fool, that I've got the drop on them outlaws? Say, there—this to the outlaws—"shed your fightin' cross'au and be quick 'bout it, Black Hoss Billiam."

Black Horse Bill unbuckled his belt and dropped it to the ground. His friends followed his example.

"That war a purty trick you played on us, Dauntless Dan'l," the old detective said, advancing closer to the horsemen.

A light, airy laugh escaped the young horseman's lips.

"Sir, if you take me for Dauntless Dan you are sadly mistaken," the youth replied in a voice clear and musical—a voice that was not Dauntless Dan's at all.

Kit and Rattler both stared at him in astonishment.

"Dauntless Dan, you can't play any more of your sharp tricks on us," declared Dr. Vance.

"Sir, I repeat it, I am not Dauntless Dan," replied the horseman.

"Then who the deuce are you?" asked Old Kit.

"I am Dan's brother, Charles—his double. Dan, mounted upon the famous black stallion that he rode from the stockade at Round Vale Ranch, and five of his men, just left in pursuit of Captain Pluto who, with two young lady captives started for Old Mexico yesterday evening."

"I'll swar I believe he speaks the Book-o'-Revelation truth!" declared Rattler.

"Shame on you!" piped in Old Sabina, "to be sure he does, for hav'n't I been with these folks all day and night, and wasn't it me that eavesdropped the outlaws and heard 'em make 'rangements to flee to Mexico with the gals? and me that put the Rangers after 'em? Say?"

"Great horn o' Joshua!" exclaimed Kit, "did I ever git into sich a mixed-up muddle before? Rattler, I'd give your chance o' gittin' to heaven if I war with Black Horse Bill in pursuit o' Captain Pluto. I'd take my chances with the boy, jist to git to trump Hermer's big card."

"Sir, you can take my horse and go," said Charles, dismounting from his horse; "it is the animal that's made Black Horse Bill famous."

"And, Tommy Rattler, you can take my mule, Gentle Annie," added Old Sabina, "and go along, so you can."

"The fact is," Charles went on, "we were going in search of you by brother Dan's request."

In case we found you soon, we were to furnish Kit Bandy and Tom Rattler with horses and tell them to follow on down Trail Canyon. And, right now, let me assure you all of one thing that can no longer be kept a secret, and that is, Black Horse Bill's band of Rangers are not outlaws. We have permitted ourselves to be regarded as such for the the purpose of hunting down real criminals. Moreover, gentlemen, my brother, young as he is, bears the commission of captain of a company of independent rangers, duly issued by the Governor of this Territory. Owing to the fact that Dan and I resemble each other so closely, it is no trouble for either of us to pass as Black Horse Bill, as the people have seen fit to call the captain of our band, though I do not see how the "Bill" came to be added on. Then, again, there are hundreds that know Dauntless Dan Darcy who have no idea he is the so-called Black Horse Bill. But, more than this I will tell you at another time, gentlemen."

Charlie Darcy was a slender, handsome young man, evidently some years older than his brother Dan, but his face was smooth, and his features delicate and refined. Long, dark, silken hair hung to his shoulders, and as he passed the reins of the famous black horse to Old Kit the detective noticed that his hands were small and shapely as a woman's.

After some further conversation Kit and Rattler mounted their animals to start away. As they did so Charlie remarked to them:

"I have one request to make of you, good friends, and that is—that you take Colonel Hermer alive, if possible."

"By the horn o' Joshua!" exclaimed Kit, "thar's nobody wants him alive wuss than I, Ka-ris-topher Ko-lumbus Bandy; and I could have taken him long ago, but I have been watchin' his goin's and comin's in hopes of bein' able to find the place where he's hid away a little girl baby that it is now known he kidnapped from its widowed mother four or five years ago."

Charlie started as the old detective made known these facts.

"Whose child was it, Bandy?" he asked, in a half-choking voice that surprised his auditors.

"It was the child o' one Mrs. Helen Freeman."

"Who put you on the trail of Colonel Hermer?"

"A Chicago detective who didn't understand workin' up the mountains and ranches and Ingin camps; and I have figured the thing down to the pint that Hermer is Pluto, and that he did come into this country with a little girl baby, but where she is now is just what I want to find out, and find out I will, or my name ain't Mountain Kit!"

"And where is the mother—Helen Freeman?" asked Charlie.

"In Los Angeles, California, I understand, though I war to report to the Chicago sleuth if I found the child. It seems she was a handsome young widow with the one child, and Colonel Hermer, whose real name is Seth Brisbane, fell in love with her, and because she didn't reciprocate, the mean imp thought he'd punish her by stealin' her child."

"Then you never saw the woman?"

"No sir."

"Well, Mr. Bandy," said Charlie, "my brother and I have been in this country four years for the same purpose—searching for Helen Freeman's child."

"You don't say so!"

"I do; and further, I am Helen Freeman, the mother of the lost child!"

"Horn o' Joshua!" cried Kit, astonishment depicted in his rugged face.

"Great Rosycrusians!" exclaimed Rattler.

"Another surprise," added Dr. Vance, "though I am free to confess, madam, that your voice, features and physical contour led me to suspect the truth the moment you dismounted from your horse."

"Sakes alive!" exclaimed Sabina, elevating her hands in surprise at the doctor's self-confessed powers of penetration; "then, what do ye say 'bout me and my contower?"

"I should say you were a woman able to take care of yourself and your husband, too," answered the doctor, smiling.

"Mistaken, doctor," declared Sabina, "you're 'way off your foundation, for I am—a man!"

And before the astonished doctor could express his surprise or Mrs. Freeman could fully comprehend the true meaning of Sabina's words, the supposed wife of Old Kit threw aside her bonnet and slipping out of her dress stood before the confused spectators in a neat-

fitting suit of male attire—the smooth-faced, little old pardner-detective of Kit Bandy, *Icha-bod Flea!*!”

CHAPTER XVIII. A DESERT DUEL.

FIVE days have passed and the scene of our story changes.

Over a treeless, arid waste of Southern Arizona, under the burning sun of mid-day, with a hot wind blowing steadily in their faces, and glaring sands almost blinding them, a little cavalcade moved wearily toward the south. There were seven persons all told in the party. Five of these were men, two were women. Of the former, one of them we have met before. It was Colonel Jack Hermer, or as the reader already knows, Captain Pluto, the Outlaw Chief. The two women were India Vance and Lotta Reed—captives with whom the outlaws were fleeing to Old Mexico.

The horses ridden by the fugitives moved at a slow walk. They were well-nigh exhausted with heat and thirst. For days and nights, stopping only for a few minutes at a time, had the poor beasts borne their burdens with but a morsel of food and little water. Nor were their riders in much better condition.

Knowing that he would be pursued Captain Pluto had taken a route that he would never have dared to take under less extreme circumstances. This was across the treeless, grassless desert of sand where we find them. He had entered the plain long before daylight that morning, and for hours they had ridden on without a moment's halt. When in the heart of the desert—with fifteen or twenty miles yet before them to shade or water—the outlaws began to despair of ever making the journey.

As for the maidens they bore their suffering without complaint. All hope had long since died out of their breasts, and despondent and despairing—half delirious with heat and thirst, they were carried along, little caring how soon death might relieve them of their suffering.

To the girls Colonel Hermer had made known his true character, though he claimed to India that her persistent refusal of his love had driven him to despair, and from despair to outlawry.

Before starting on their Southern flight Pluto had promised one “Cordova” Ralph, a fearless young outlaw, that Lotta Reed should be his; and during their flight the fellow had, by every attention—by kind words and acts that under any other circumstances would have been considered the essence of gallantry—endeavored to win her favor. Nor was the maiden indifferent to his kindness, which was to her a promise implied of immunity from violence. She accepted it with all the graces of a lady, entertaining meanwhile the faintest of hopes that out of it might come deliverance to her and India.

But during the day—while crossing the burning waste of sand, an accident occurred that dispelled this dim ray of hope from her breast. It was, perhaps, two o'clock in the afternoon—an hour, in fact, after a dark clump of bushes that marked the location of a spring where water and rest would soon be obtained had appeared in sight—that Cordova Ralph fell from his horse completely overcome with the heat.

Two of his comrades endeavored to revive him by fanning him with their sombreros, but all to no purpose. The sun-stroke had been fatal. Cordova Ralph was dead, and mounting their horses the party rode on leaving the lifeless form unburied on the desert to the vultures that had been hovering all day in the burning sky above them.

Finally the spring, that had so long been in sight, was reached, and the weary party dismounted.

Around the spring were clumps of desert willows that afforded a most grateful shade to men and beasts.

The “spring,” however, proved to be nothing but a damp spot in a depression in the sand. Not a drop of water was visible. The drifting sands had filled the pool, but falling to with hands the men dug away the sand, and in a few minutes the hole filled with clear, sparkling water.

Then the thirst of the captives and the captors was slaked, and afterward the horses were permitted to drink from the spring. The remnants of their food was then brought out and devoured, the horses cropping the willows.

“Poor Cordova!” said Pluto, when he saw the spirits and strength of his men reviving, “if he could only have held out a few hours longer all would have been well.”

“But, captain,” said Red Elza, a dark-vis-

aged and cruel-looking wretch, “we’re not out o’ the desert yet.”

“No; but we have only about ten miles yet to go when water, wood and Mexico will greet us,” replied Pluto; “and as the coast is clear we will remain here until the cool of the evening and then the journey will be easily made.”

“The cool o’ the evenin’ may prove the mornin’ o’ the resurrection,” thought Tiger Dave, a man whose face was quite suggestive of the name he bore among his associates.

“Tiger’s gettin’ narvous,” said Red Elza, facetiously.

“Not a bit o’ it,” retorted Tiger, “but we don’t want to lose all at the very last hour for the sake of an extra exertion; but say, captain, I want a word with you in private.”

The two arose and walked away about fifty paces and entered into a low conversation. Red Elza became restless and uneasy the moment they left, and presently he walked down to where the two stood and said:

“Captain, the death o’ Cordova makes a vacancy that I want to fill; that is, I speak next for that gal, Lotta.”

“You’re too late, Elza,” replied the captain: “I have just promised that vacancy to Tiger Dave.”

“Captain,” replied Red Elza, and there was no uncertain meaning in his tone and the light of his eyes, “I have always been true to you and our cause. I have served you longer than Tiger Dave, and I am entitled to this favor, and I demand it!”

“Look here, Elza,” said Tiger, “‘fust come fust served,’ is our motto.”

“Not in this case,” retorted Elza: “I mean to have my wish or there’ll be trouble!”

“Boys,” said the captain, “for heaven’s sake don’t let there be any trouble at this hour.”

“I don’t want trouble, captain,” responded Elza, “but I do want and will hev that gal, or blood! That’s the long and short o’ it!”

“You can have blood, Red Elza!” retorted Tiger Dave, “for I’m not the man to give up my rights because some one else demands ‘em.”

Both men were quick to anger and both desperate fellows when aroused, and Captain Pluto saw that he had trouble on his hands.

“Let the girl settle the matter herself,” suggested Pluto; “or you fellows might cast lots.”

“I will do neither!” declared Tiger Dave.

“And I repeat it,” reiterated Red Elza: “I will have the girl or blood, and the matter shall be settled before one of us leaves this spring!”

“Then blood it is!” exclaimed Tiger, drawing his revolver.

“Hold, men!” cried the captain, stepping in between; “if you must fight, let it be fair—at ten paces.”

To this Tiger consented, and the ground was stepped off by the captain.

The combatants took their position.

“One, two, three!” counted the outlaw chief, and at the word three both men fired simultaneously, and both men fell forward, dead, shot through the brain.

CHAPTER XIX.

AN UNEXPECTED APPEARANCE.

ALONE with the one outlaw, and unconscious of the trouble that was brewing between Red Elza and Tiger Dave, India and Lotta sat in the shade of the willows, disheartened and despondent—all hope of rescue having long since died out of their breasts.

The outlaw chief and his two companions had been gone perhaps ten minutes when Lotta, whose eyes were fixed on the ground a few paces in front of her, suddenly started with a little cry, and grasped India’s arm. Looking in the direction indicated by her friend’s startled gaze, India saw the hot sand near a low, spreading cactus suddenly bulge upward, and from its midst a human form appeared.

It was the form of a man whose head had been concealed under the cactus—his body under the sand—that quickly sprung to an upright position, shook the sand from his body, and with a revolver in each hand turned toward the spring. To the startled maidens he was a stranger, but when a second figure rose as if by magic from the earth, a cry burst from their lips, for they recognized him as Dauntless Dan Darcy, the Free-Lance of the Plains!

The other was Donald Fairfax.

Simultaneous with this discovery the crack of the duelists’ pistols rung out, and the outlaw left to watch the girls started to his feet, grasping his revolver. The next moment he fell dead with a bullet from Dauntless Dan’s pistol,

and, alarmed by the report of the weapon, Captain Pluto came rushing up to find himself confronted by the two rangers, with drawn revolvers.

“Stand, colonel!” exclaimed Dan, “or we’ll finish you and be done with it!”

Colonel Hermer turned deathly pale, and staggering back almost fell.

“Oh, we’ve got you this time, colonel,” Fairfax said, “and you’d as well drop them irons and give up.”

“Gents, I know when I’m downed,” replied Pluto, with a sudden change in his demeanor, unbuckling his belt and tossing it down at the feet of Fairfax.

“You’re a wise villain,” added Dan, “and now we will halter you up,” and taking a lariat from one of the saddles they bound the outlaw most securely.

“And now, girls,” said the young Ranger, “we have time to speak with you.”

India rushed up to her boy lover and in a paroxysm of joy threw her arms about his neck, sobbing:

“Oh, Dan! the Lord sent you to save us!”

“He provided the ways and means, India,” answered the boy, “and we did the work. But I forget you have not met my gallant friend, Donald Fairfax. Don, this is Miss India Vance and this Miss Lotta Reed.”

The maidens acknowledged the introduction in a most joyful spirit, and while Dan and India plied each other with questions, Fairfax and Lotta did likewise.

“But now, Dan,” India finally said, “you must tell us how you got here, and how you left our friends!”

“Left them all well, but in trouble,” answered Dan, “and when we found you were captives, and being carried away, I rustled around and got up a party of mounted Rangers and started in pursuit. We followed close on your captors’ heels until they entered this plain; then we changed our plans and concluded to keep around to the west and head you off. We had a long ride to do this; but, as water was easily obtained and our horses were good, we made it easily enough.

“Feeling sure that you would pass by this spring, Donald and I permitted our friends to bury us lightly in the sand where we could conceal our heads under a cactus; and then they took our horses and left, going south about two miles to a big blow-out in which to conceal themselves until the outlaws should pass that way, or we signal them to come up—”

“Which I will do at once,” interrupted Fairfax, walking out into the open plain and pacing steadily to and fro until he saw his friends ride from the blow-out and start toward the spring.

“Oh, dear!” cried India, “I had forgotten to tell you that there are two more outlaws somewhere about!”

“We saw them shoot each other about something, and then we concluded was our time to act. When the rogues fell out then honest men got in their work, and I hope, girls, your trouble has ended.”

“Oh, you brave men!” cried India, fairly crazed with joy, “we can never repay you for all your trouble! And so you did whip the Indians and outlaws in their attack on Fort Bandy?”

“Whip ‘em? I should say so!” replied Dan.

“How foolish we were to listen to Hermer,” Lotta said; “when the battle was raging he came and told us that you could never defeat so many, and prevailed on us to flee with him, Old Ham following. Not half a mile from the cave four outlaws leaped from concealment and took us all prisoners, Hermer included, though his being made a prisoner was all a blind. A little ways further on they murdered poor Old Ham in cold blood and threw his body in the bushes.”

“Oh! I am so rejoiced to hear that my dear father was not hurt,” India said; “but what of Tom Rattler and Kit Bandy, Dan?”

“They’ll be here in less than five minutes,” answered Donald Fairfax; “they’re coming right out yonder like a whirlwind. They overtook us and joined us in pursuit of you.”

“The dear, old, ugly, jolly fellows!” cried India, her eyes moist with tears of joy. “God bless them!”

“It was Sabina Bandy that put us on your track,” Dan said. “The old lady was secreted near when your captors decided to flee with you to Mexico, and overheard every word spoken. But by the way, girls, Sabina Bandy’s a man!”

“What? Sabina Bandy a man?” exclaimed India.

“A man—Old Kit’s pardner-detective.”

“Then why did he go on so about his wife, the old story-teller? Oh, ain’t he awful!”

Further speech was drowned in the shouts of men, the tramp of horses, and the noise of their trappings, and the next moment Bandy and Rattler rode up, each with a led horse—two of the four animals being coal-blacks.

"Hurrah!" yelled Bandy at sight of the girls, "the gals are safe—the trap's worked like Tom Rattler's tongue—hoo-rah!" and throwing himself from his saddle he ran to where the girls stood, and grasping each by a hand continued: "God bless ye, gals! I'm a hull band o' angelic joy, I am, by the horn o' Joshua! I know you're happy 'cause yer pretty faces, and the smiles caperin' round your lips, and the light dancin' like fairies in your eyes tells me so, and then—"

"Say, Kitsie," interrupted Rattler, "don't overdo the thing, but whenever you git through stand back and let me have a chance to speak to the gals—git a word in edgeways."

Bandy released the girls' hands and as Rattler grasped them, he said:

"Gals, I'm not sich an ole fool as Kit Bandy to slosh around and scatter langwidge, but I'm as glad to see you safe and well, as though I was the lover o' both o' you. You've had a hard ole time o' it, I dare say; but it's nothin' to what that ole scoundrel there'll have afore he's the chance to steal another pair o' pretty gals."

A general rejoicing now followed, during which Captain Pluto, who heard and witnessed all, thought to throw a damper upon India's spirits by saying:

"Miss India, I hope you'll find that one outlaw is no better than another, for I repeat it, Dauntless Dan is Black Horse Bill!"

"And I acknowledge it," replied Dan, turning with a look of defiance upon Hermer.

A little cry of surprise burst from the maidens' lips.

"Don't git skeered, gals," cried Old Kit; "there'll be no danger from this outfit 'less Old Tom Rattler should suddenly turn pirate and try to run away with you. He tried to rob me o' my wife, Sabina, one't, the old buccaneer!"

"Oh, you big story-teller!" exclaimed India; "we've heard all about you and your wife."

"Be that so?" and both Kit and Rattler roared with laughter.

At the earliest opportunity, Dan Darcy took the girls aside and told them all there was in his being Black Horse Bill, just as the reader has already heard it from the lips of his sister, Helen Freeman, with the additional fact that his true name was Daniel Clarkson, having assumed that of Darcy so that Seth Brisbane, alias Jack Hermer, might not have his suspicions aroused.

"But do you think, Dan, Hermer will, or can be compelled to tell where your sister's child is?" India asked.

"The man's a coward, and Bandy thinks he can twist the truth out of him," replied Dan.

"Oh, the cruel, heartless wretch," exclaimed India; "and to think my dear father always had such confidence in him. Oh, dear! what was that? It sounded like a groan!"

"It was a groan!" declared Dan, and turning, the three started back to their friends, who had also heard the sound which came from the willows south of the spring.

Bandy and Rattler hurried away to investigate, and near the lifeless body of Red Elza they found Tiger Dave, with a bullet-hole in his forehead, his face covered with blood, seated upon the sands gazing about him in a delirious sort of a way.

"Where's Elza?—where's the captain? where am I?" the wounded man mumbled.

"Elza we don't know," answered Rattler; "the captain's all safe, and you're right here, but 'bout a goner."

Helping the man to his feet, the old bordermen supported him between them, and in this way succeeded in getting him to the spring.

At sight of him Hermer became visibly affected, saying:

"He'd be better off dead."

Kit brought the wounded man water, then washed his face, bathed his head and bandaged his wound.

Tiger Dave seemed to rally after Kit quenched his thirst and bathed his head. A couple of saddles were placed at his back to prop him up, and as he gazed around him and his eyes fell upon Hermer he seemed to have suddenly regained his memory.

Gazing steadily at the outlaw chief for several moments, then at the others—again transferring his gaze to Hermer, as if trying to study out the change that had taken place in the situation since the duel, he finally said:

"Captain, they got ye after all, didn't they?"

"Yes, Dave, but if you and Elza hadn't quarreled they would never have got me."

"And if you hadn't been a coward, captain," retorted Tiger Dave, with a look of contempt upon his death-marked face, "we wouldn't have quarreled. If you'd stuck to your promise with me, and not let Elza scare you, there'd been no trouble. I've got to die because of it. Yes, cap'n, you're a coward and an ingrate, and of all others, you should 'a' been my friend. I became a robber and a rascal to please you, and the meanest thing of my life was when I helped you to punish a poor weak woman because she wouldn't marry you."

"There, there, Dave! possess your soul in peace," half-sneered the fettered outlaw; "you should be thinking of something else than what I have done."

"Some of what you did I helped to do," went on Dave, "but the meanest o' all war stealin' a widdler woman's only child—that little Freeman girl."

"Don't let that trouble you, Dave," Pluto said; "I take all responsibilities for that, and will make amends."

"Ah!" half-sneered the wounded outlaw, "you want to purchase your liberty with that secret. You shall not!"

"Tiger Dave, open your lips and I will curse you till you cannot rest in your grave!" threatened Pluto, his eyes glaring like a demon's.

"Don't fear his curses, Dave!" interposed Old Kit; "unburden your soul—spit it out, and make as clean breast as you can, even if it is the last hour of the last day."

Dave began to talk when again the outlaw chief interrupted him. It was evident that the wounded man was fast sinking, and Captain Pluto, seeing this, was endeavoring to prevent, by interruption, the revelations of any secrets until he was past talking. To help him along, Bandy finally said:

"Dave, I know all about the abduction of Helen Freeman's child, and that it was abducted by Seth Brisbane—"

"That's him! that's Seth Brisbane!" cried Tiger Dave, looking at Hermer excitedly; "he's now sailin' under a false name."

"I know the gentleman," continued Bandy, "and by watching him these months I had hoped to find the child. Dauntless Dan, here, is the child's uncle, and her mother is the Charlie Darcy, of the so-called Black Horse Bill's band. They, too, have been watchin' Hermer, as well as killin' outlaws, in hopes o' findin' the child. If you know where it is, let it out, Dave."

"The child is with the family of a man named Joel Barker, in Pueblo! They call her Hattie Hermer. Mrs. Barker is my sister. Poor Lydia! it will almost kill her when she hears of my death as an outlaw. She does not know the child left with her was abducted. I helped Brisbane steal it from its mother."

"Thank you, Dave, thank you," said Dauntless Dan.

"It's a lie—every word of it!" raved the fettered outlaw.

"It is not—I swear it, before God!" declared Dave, solemnly.

"I believe you, Dave," declared Dan, "and I pray God will be merciful with you for this confession."

Gradually the wretched man grew weaker, and finally became unconscious, but it was late in the night before death relieved him of his suffering.

CHAPTER XX.

THE HAPPIEST OF CONCLUSIONS.

AGAIN the scene of our story changes. Once more we will go back to Round Vale Ranch. The sun is sinking low in the west when a man mounted upon a coal-black horse is seen coming up the valley at a swinging gallop.

"Black Horse Bill! Black Horse Bill!" cried a ranchman, and soon the alarm had spread throughout the entire ranch.

On the broad porch in front of Mr. Randolph Burke's house soon gathered an eager, excited crowd of men and women.

Among the former were Dr. Vance and Ichabod Flea, and among the latter Mrs. Helen Freeman, in the proper garb of her sex—a dark-eyed and lovely woman upon whose face were plainly traced the lines of mental anguish and grief.

For ten days the doctor, Mrs. Freeman and Ichabod Flea had been guests at Round Vale. There had they arranged with Dauntless Dan to meet them when they returned from the pursuit of the outlaws, and during these days of waiting and watching their anxiety and suspense became almost unendurable.

To Mr. Burke, their kind host, they revealed the secret of Black Horse Bill, as well as the villainy of Colonel Jack Hermer, but until

Hermer should be captured, the maidens rescued, and the pursuers known to be safe, it was deemed best to keep the secrets from the ranchmen.

At sight of the approaching horseman Mrs. Freeman uttered a cry of joy, exclaiming:

"It is brother Dan!"

"But he is alone," said Dr. Vance, sadly, "and I fear the worst."

On came the horseman, straight toward the ranch.

"Yes, it's Black Horse Bill, and mounted upon Demon, the very horse he rode from yonder corral," exclaimed one of the ranchmen.

"He's coming here," called out Mr. Burke, to his men; "do not offer to interfere with him. It is all right."

On—into the ranch and up to the porch galloped the horseman, waving his hat and shouting aloud:

"Men, I've brought back Demon, well broken to the saddle! Hurrah, sister Helen! Hurrah, Doctor Vance! they're safe! they're safe!"

"Brother Dan!" cried Mrs. Freeman, throwing her arms about her brother's neck as he leaped from his saddle to the ground and up onto the porch; "have you found my baby?"

"Yes, baby's found!" shouted Dan, wild with joy; "India and Lotta's safe and will soon be here! and Captain Pluto's deader'n a smelt; tried to escape and Kit Bandy plugged him!"

"Where is my child, Dan?" asked his sister, with quivering lips.

"Long ways from here, Charlie—I mean Helen, but in good hands. She's in Pueblo. There come the others! They sent me on to break the news gently."

"Humph!" ejaculated Ichabod Flea, "if you call this breakin' news gently, to dash in here like a young cyclone, I wouldn't want to be around when you come ungently. But say, how did my friend Bandy behave?"

"He's one of the grandest men I ever heard of!" declared Dauntless Dan, "and Old Tom Rattler's not a whit behind. They're a Roman legion, any way you take them."

In half an hour the rest of the party came up, when a most happy meeting between the doctor, his daughter and niece was witnessed by the assembled crowd.

Dauntless Dan introduced the famous Kit Bandy and noted hunter, Tom Rattler, to Mr. Burke and the ranchmen, and in a little while the two old fellows were making themselves at home in their usual happy way.

But no one was more of a hero than Dauntless Dan himself; and he enjoyed immensely the story of the excitement that prevailed the day he had so suddenly left them on the back of the mad horse, Demon.

In turn the boy told them of his wild ride up the valley to Arcadia Ranch, his desertion of Demon, and the subsequent recapture of the horse in Arcadia Valley by his rangers.

On the following morning Mrs. Freeman, accompanied by Dan Clarkson, Donald Fairfax and Old Kit Bandy and his pard, Ichabod Flea, took their departure for Pueblo, where, after a long and tedious journey, they arrived. They readily found Joel Barker's, and there, true enough, Helen Freeman found her child, whom she recognized on sight, for, although she had grown to be a girl of seven years, her face and features were the same.

Mrs. Freeman had no trouble in satisfying the Barkers of her right to the child, and departed with her, the happiest mother in the land.

To Old Kit she promised a handsome reward for his services, and the detective answered that when he was in need of funds he would call on her—which he hasn't done yet. From Pueblo he went away, no one knew where.

Dr. Vance gathered up all his stock and moved onto a ranch over in Eastern New Mexico, feeling satisfied with his experience at Arcadia Valley. Three years later he took into partnership with him Dan Clarkson and Donald Fairfax, who had in the mean time become somewhat related to him, in that Dan had married his daughter, India, and Donald his niece, Lotta. And, finally, to cap the climax, the doctor himself got married and moved with his wife to Southern California, leaving the boys to "run the ranch." He married Mrs. Helen Freeman.

After the death of Captain Pluto, his band—or what was left of it after the bloody fight at Fort Bandy—gradually melted away, and the Palace of Pluto is one of the sights to be seen now in Arizona by the adventuresome tourist.

THE END.

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BEADLE AND ADAMS, Publishers,
98 William Street, New York.